

# Deep Focus

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# DEEP FOCUS

October 2001 & January 2002

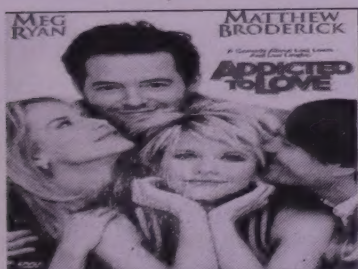
## CONTENTS

### 3 Editorial



### 5 The 'Marginalised' as the 'invisible':

Notes on Marginalisation and Displacement in the Modern Context  
**N. Manu Chakravarthy**



### 11 Addicted to love: Le sabotage of a super-migrant **Anne Lhuillier**

### 27 The Theme of 'Dark-ness' in Cinematography **Sunny Joseph I S C**



### 31 Of Life... On Films... Adoor in conversation with Venkiteswaran



### 77 The Migrant in the City The Urban Space in the Hindi cinema of the Fifties **M. K. Raghavendra**



### 85 The Organisation of Time in Agraharathil Kazhuthai An Analysis of one sequence **R. Nandakumar**



### 97 Migration and Displacement: Aravindan's Vaastuhara - a case study **Vasanti Sankaranarayanan**



103



## Searching for a Place of their own:

Gonul Donmez interviews the Iranian Film Director Jaffer Panahi

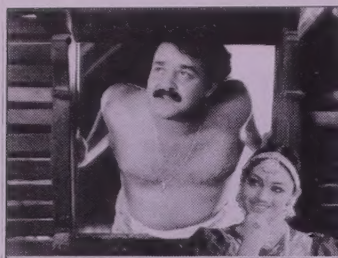
123



## The weak may also win

Gonul Donmez-Colin talks to Takaaki Watanabe on his film Maiden of the Spring

111



## Media Commentary:

Reflections on some methodological questions with reference to Manichitrathazhu  
**R. Nandakumar**

126



## International Film Festival of Kerala

March 30 – April 6th 2001  
An Overview

**Vasanti Sankaranarayanan**

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# Editorial

## Cinematic representation of Migration and Displacement

Migration and displacement in the modern context bring to focus sharply a nostalgia for 'dwelling', a place of one's own; breaking it down into its essentials, it is a longing for the familiar voices and sounds—the vernacular tongue, the songs, music, dance and rhythms, longing for one's own gods, the rituals, symbols, ways and forms of worship, yearning for familiar tastes, one's staple diet and beverages, the dresses, habits in general and a familiarity with the things around, the air you breathe, the trees, the birds, the shrubs, the by-ways, the structures, the hills, the rivers and people which give a sense of being rooted, therefore a sense of selfhood and identity. The postmodern represent a state of uprootedness, a loss of that selfhood and identity. The modern canvas is that of millions of people made refugees due to border conflict and civil wars: the animals and species of the land and the sea being conserved from extinction. They are modern sanctuaries; holy places or places of worship. The experiments on species and vegetation goes on unhindered to produce hybrids—science and technology (reason) playing gods. The patenting of the vegetation—edible and decorative—soon will disinherit two-third of the population of the planet from their natural rights to those things. These state of affairs is controlled and manipulated by a global economic organisation which disperses people to distant lands and places. This economic structure is hegemonic and violent on cultures and people who resist it. The postmodern represent the global citizen eating Macdonalds. One may assume it is natural for a medium like cinema to focus its attention on this situation if anything but catastrophic.

I must acknowledge that the idea to bring out an issue of Deep Focus with the theme migration and displacement is inspired by a Dutch-Portuguese co-production, *Dying to Go Home* directed by George Sluizer and Carlos da Silva. Manuel Spirito Santo is a portuguese imigrant in Amsterdam. He dies in a road accident and is buried there. However Santo's spirit is restless. He wants to be buried in his family plot in his native land. He is a ghost walking around invisible to others. He is also in communication with other (imigrant) ghosts seeking repose of their souls. Through dreams he

communicates his wish to Julia, his sister. Julia goes to Amsterdam to inherit her brother's property—a bar and a yacht— and she discovers there that she is inheriting a lot of debts as well. She decides to renovate the bar and make it profitable. The entire film, however is Manuel Spirito Santo's efforts to get himself buried in his homeland with the help of his sister Julia. Julia finds out that within the existing framework of law the only way she can carry the dead body of Spirito Santo is by cremating him. The body is exhumed and cremated and the urn containing his ashes is sent to Portugal. However, at the border the customs officials sniff something foul and refuse to release the urn without further authentication. They open the urn to check the content and part of his ashes spills on to the ground. In the meantime a multinational company is setting up a factory and we see a bulldozer razing down the entire village including his ancestral home... His displacement becomes total. The film is a comment on the contemporary realities around the world—on borders and boundaries, on national and international laws governing the movement of people, of goods and services, a critique of the so called affluence of modern times, of modernity which dispossess the people while giving an illusion of well being. When Julia sets out to Amsterdam to inherit her brother's property the entire village is agog due to the sudden riches Julia is about to inherit from a brother who really did not bother to visit them even once while he was alive. The film is loud and emphatic of the rupture modernity introduces into family and community relationships and the final disintegration of the village itself with the arrival of a multinational company. *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) by John Ford is another film which critiques modernity and development in no uncertain terms and how it has devastated the lives of millions of ordinary rural Americans.

In India we have a vast body of films representing migration and displacement from rural to the urban due to poverty, caste violence, oppression of the zamindars and so on. I cite the example of the film *Do Bida Zameen* (1953) directed by Bimal Roy which introduces a critique of both the urban and the rural. The story is set in a small village in West Bengal in the early fifties. In a drought ravaged village, Shambu a small farmer waits for the rains to cultivate his land. The landlord of the village plans to sell a large plot of land to a contractor from the city to set up a factory and Shambu's land is part of it as Shambu owes money to the landlord. In order to redeem the land from the landlord by paying back his debts, Shambu sets out to Calcutta to earn the money. Shambu and his son



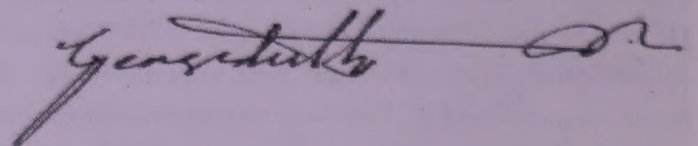
Kanhaiya are bewildered by the extremes of wealth and poverty of Calcutta. Shambu begins his work as a Rikshaw puller and Kanhaiya becomes a shoeshine boy. Their earnings are meagre and they are unable to save anything at all. Unable to cope with life in the village and worried over her husband and son, Shambu's wife sets out for Calcutta in search of her husband and son. After much travail, the family is united and returns to the village only to find a factory in their land, which completes their cycle of dispossession. The film examines both rural and urban predicament of the poor and poses a question as to what could be an alternative! The film is a narrative of misplaced expectations of a people for a better quality of life after independence. The euphoria of freedom from colonial oppression died down even before the colonisers had actually left! The civilizing projects of modernity took a nosedive at its very inception with millions displaced overnight with the partition. Subsequently too, the successive governments of modern India could only dispossess millions for conservation of forests, for conservation of wild animals, building dams and mining minerals and now from the pavements to 'keep the city clean', all in the name of development which will modernise India and make its people prosperous like that of the West! The Indian rural reality by and large remains unchanged even today though the preoccupations of the film makers have shifted to the urban locale.

Another genre of films depicting migration, displacement and dispossession are *Garam Hava*, 1973, Directed by M.S Satyu, *Padosi*, 1941 directed by V. Shantaram, *Tamas*, 1987, Directed by Govind Nihalani, *Momo*, 1995, directed by Shyam Benegal, *Subernarekha*, 1962 directed by Ritwik Ghatak. While the narratives differ, they all deal with the trauma of partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan; the rupture, the violence, the sadness and the suffering it brought into the lives of millions of displaced, Hindus and Muslims. For the millions displaced, the reality of 'home' became a lingering nostalgia. They were severed from their familiar surroundings, from their near and dear ones. Above all it introduced in their psyche a 'hatred' for the 'other' community being the visible cause of their dispossession, displacement and sufferings which is still haunting the nation. The above mentioned films are an attempt to come to terms with the painful experiences and memories of being uprooted and to reconstitute what one may call a 'dwelling'. What is significant in all these films is the absence of 'state' as an agent in the healing process. It is the inherent goodness of human beings which redeem themselves in the face of adversity.

A third category that deals with migration, displacement and dispossession is short and documentary films made by independent film makers. Infact, they are the most ardent critique of modernity in the Indian context. Numerous are the films made by them looking at the issue from various angles and perspectives. Within these, an amazing number of films are on the dispossession of tribals and Adivasis from their natural habitat for forest conservation, for the creation of wild life sanctuaries, for building dams and mining minerals. Here I take but one film to illustrate the point, *Narmada Diary* (1995) by the celebrated documentary film maker Anand Patwardhan. For almost two decades the people of Narmada valley, majority of them Adviasis have resisted the construction of Sardar Sarovar dam which will inundate 37000 hectares of fertile fields and forests and displace over two hundred thousand people. The resistance to the construction of this dam organised by Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement) forced the World Bank to withdraw from the project on the basis of inadequate rehabilitation programme for the displaced people. *A Narmada Diary* documents five crucial years of the struggle of the NBA.

The sustained non-violent struggle of the NBA may not have succeeded in stopping the construction of the dams, however, it has succeeded in raising a few crucial questions as to what is development? Who are the beneficiaries? How forceful eviction of a people from their habitat is justified? The struggle is to retain 'the dwellings' of people, than against the construction of the dam where it challenges the constructs of 'progress' and notions of 'civilization'. In this sense the struggle of the people of Narmada valley emerges as a symbol of peoples struggle all over the world against the tyranny of a development agenda that dispossess, marginalise and blot out the histories and traditions of diverse cultures and people and finally the people themselves.

Though there exist a vast body of films dealing with migration and displacement and literature critiquing the current global development agenda and its sustainability and desirability, the response to the call for papers on the subject has been poor. In this issue we have four papers dealing with the theme migration and displacement. The other articles in this issue are interviews with film directors and film analyses which are interesting.





# The 'Marginalised' as the 'invisible' :

## Notes on Marginalisation and Displacement in the Modern Context

N. Manu Chakravarthy

### I. A Philosophical/Ideological Distinction

A fundamental distinction, with larger implications, forms the edifice of this essay that should also provide a rather debatable conceptual base for other pieces on the issue of Marginalisation and Displacement. The distinction in this essay will be supported by only two illustrations, which, however, are good enough to serve as textual supports for it. There is really no need to cite more illustrative examples by way of

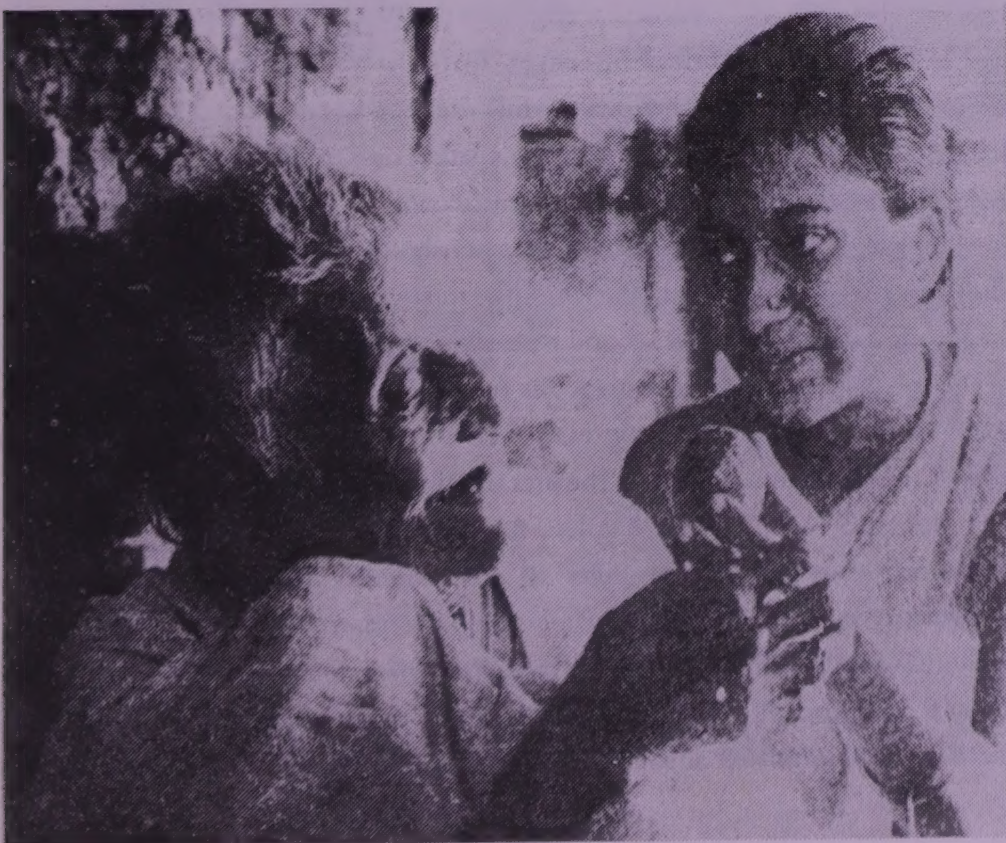
further reinforcing the distinction the essay tries to establish throughout.

It had better be made clear at the very outset that the distinction at work in the essay does not privilege or hierarchise either of the two categories under discussion, namely Marginalisation and Displacement. On the contrary, the distinction only serves to introduce a philosophical argument by way of clarifying certain positions vis a vis the experience of Modernity in Societies in general and the Indian Society in particular.

While the tragic consequences of Displacement cannot be either ignored or overlooked, it needs to be stated, with qualifications of course, that, when sharply contextualised, displacement might lead us to consider the possibilities of alternatives for the displaced, whereas such potential does not exist for the marginalised. In other words, displacement could create spaces for the displaced in different contexts opened up by the phenomenon of displacement itself. As far as the marginalised are concerned there is only the experience of losing even what exists and the question of seeking alternatives in an altered context just does not arise. There is, as far as the

marginalised are concerned, such an absolute loss of space and self even in the given situation that the very idea of looking for an alternative self in a new and different context becomes impossible to contemplate. Displacement, however, does carry in its framework the possibility of an extension of space and self simply by virtue of 're-positioning' the self in altered circumstances, a feature that is denied to the marginalised being. Thus it could be argued at one level that displacement, with all its tragic nuances, manages to create at least hopes of

*Pather Panchali*





empowerment while disempowerment seems to be the only condition of the marginalised.

It is not only in actual history that what has been argued so far in the essay can be observed, but, quite significantly, in all kinds of 'texts'—films, literature, sociology, anthropology, etc. etc... A careful reading of 'texts' would reveal the fact that the displaced somehow manage to keep themselves afloat whereas the marginalised get 'drowned', become 'invisible' both literally and metaphorically.

The crucial point this essay attempts to make is that even 'texts' sensitive to the plight of the displaced and the marginalised somehow eventually turn more towards the displaced tending to neglect the marginalised.

The argument here is not that the travails of the displaced are less significant than those of the marginalised, but that for particular historical reasons—which will be dealt with at length later on—the trials and agonies of the marginalised get 'erased' leaving the marginalised 'invisible' towards the end of a 'text'. The specific philosophical/ideological reason behind it will be discussed towards the end of the essay. Further, for more or less the same reason, the 'reader' of a 'text' gets more preoccupied with the displaced and takes her/his sight off the plight of the marginalised. Thus there is a strange convergence of the preoccupations of the 'text' and the reader that leaves the displaced in a zone of attention, condemning the marginalised to areas of invisibility.

The distinction that the essay makes while dealing with the phenomena of displacement and marginalisation centres round the argument that modernity, as one of the forces unleashed by mainstream history, is built on the principle of homogeneity that ruthlessly suppresses all entities different in nature from itself. Further, the homogeneous nature of modernity does not even recognise the legitimacy of those elements that are not 'productive' in a major sense to its own survival and growth. In this sense it marginalises individuals and communities that seem to be 'resistant' to its needs and demands. The word 'marginalised' is used in this

essay to suggest both individuals and communities remaining outside the framework of modernity, and, moreover, getting progressively alienated for being 'useless' and 'unproductive' as far as the different projects of modernity are concerned. The 'displaced' in the essay refers to individuals and communities who by reorienting their nature adapt themselves to changed conditions and make the best use of them. In fact the 'displaced', as conceived of in the essay, get incorporated into the mainstream much to their own advantage and benefit. However, the 'marginalised' not only get alienated, but, more importantly, cannot derive anything out of the structures that affect them adversely. Hence, modernity would have no problem in easily incorporating the 'displaced', much to the profit of both.

## II. The Politics of Abandonment :

### *The Modernist Agenda*

An attempt is made in what follows to illustrate the philosophical/ideological distinction made in the first part of the essay. A few clarifications need to be made before the illustration is offered. First, only two sets of illustrations are made use of to underline the distinction between the displaced and the marginalised. Secondly, the first set of illustration draws attention to the situation of the marginalised individual—with particular emphasis on the woman in a patriarchal order that operates both at traditional and modern locations—while the second set focusses attention on a community - a tribal one to be specific—that faces the wrath of modernity. Thirdly, the first set of illustration is paradigmatic of the inability of the individual woman to survive her predicament whereas the second is symbolic of the defiance of a community, its courageous rebellious act, in coming to terms with the oppressive challenge of modernity. The former depicts the literally 'invisible' features of the individual in a helpless condition, while the latter portrays the 'invisibility' of a community metaphorically, and as a matter of a conscious choice.

Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* bears out the predicament of a woman, initially in the 'original' location and, subsequently, in a changed context. The woman, the



mother, in the 'original' location is an archetypal figure. She is the centre, holding the family together in spite of enormous poverty and all its accompanying trials and agonies. There is indeed, in this location, an extraordinary 'rootedness' to her 'being' amidst all the excruciating pain she undergoes. Even the crushing poverty and the devastating death of her daughter do not take anything away from her strong and rooted being. In the 'original' context, though marginalised from several forms of social and cultural life, she retains a self and a space quite significant to her existential being. There is an organic relationship between the landscape and her emotional self which no calamity can undermine. It is for this precise reason that no trauma can make her 'invisible'. The 'presence' of the self is engendered by the rooted nature of her entire emotional being. One can see in *Pather Panchali* the

*Pather Panchali*

strength of the woman in full proportions, the surrounding tragic circumstances notwithstanding.

It is towards the end of *Pather Panchali* that we witness the dislocation of the woman, which comes, among many other things, as a decision of the husband, the head of the family, to move towards an area where his fortunes could improve considerably. It is the decision taken by the man, incidentally a writer struggling to find his bearings in the literary world, to enter modern patterns of living with the hope that there would be an enrichment of his career.

What one needs to observe in all this, without simplifying anything, is the fate of the woman who, without any choices of her own, has to give her consent to the man's decision to move to the city leaving behind the rural landscape which really has nothing to offer him. There is undoubtedly a kind of inevitability built into his

choice. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that his inevitable choice, which might eventually do him good, has nothing to offer to the woman who mutely follows him. No value judgement is implied in stating that the man's choice really has nothing to offer the woman who is utterly devoid of any substance of the self in her changed circumstances. What is being argued out is that the





displacement of the family works at two different levels for the man and the woman concerned. Displacement comes as an act of choice of the man seeking a better context of living but, as far as the woman goes, means not mere physical displacement, but also an utter disintegration of her cosmos.

The essay only tries to point out that the implications of the choice of the man to move into modernity are 'nihilistic' as far as the 'being' of the woman is concerned. The annihilation of the woman's cosmos and the gradual movement towards an 'invisible' space is complete much before she actually dies in *Aparajito*. What is of great relevance is that it is the son who completes the process initiated by the father. The displacement in *Pather Panchali* completes a full circle in *Aparajito* wherein the utterly marginalised woman finds the total collapse of her inner world. Apu, the son, too is deeply entrenched in the modern world and has no time to think of the languishing mother who keeps receding into the background step by step. The choices Apu makes are what stem from the preoccupations with the modern world which promises much to him. Like the father, the son too moves into spaces of modernity while the mother keeps entering the invisible chambers, never to be extricated from it.

It is not a matter of surprise that preoccupations with modernity and the attempts of the displaced to find their bearings in the modern world lead not just the characters in the 'text', but the very framework of the 'text' too, to foreground only spaces of modernity consigning to oblivion those who cannot fit into its schemes. What is to be noted here is the sophisticated and elegant manner in which the 'text' works out the destinies of its protagonists of the modern ethos subtly marginalising its female character who has no role to play in the modern context. It needs to be acknowledged, though with no derogatory remarks being made either on the characters or the 'text' itself, that it is the film maker's personal leanings towards modernity, his ideological position as a modernist, that prevent the 'text' from fully exploring the existential predicament of the woman even though enormous

and significant spaces do exist within the existing framework of the text to do so, and independent of the preoccupations with the male protagonists. Actually, the 'text' foregrounds the male characters with such dexterity that the viewers too push the woman into the background, ultimately leaving her in an 'invisible' space.

One cannot miss the emergence in the 'text' of a sense of historical inevitability in relation to the destiny of the woman. There is a certain fatalist notion that operates with great subtlety as if to suggest that the plight of characters who cannot deal with modernity and all its attendant details cannot be different. An extrapolation of this attitude leads to the argument that the nature of history is such that those who cannot deal with it will have to accept their 'invisible' spaces. It is this sense of futility that leads the acutely sensitive viewer to question the politics of the text. This is not to suggest by any means that the female character should be shown to have triumphed over the forces of history that marginalise her. What is being argued is that in spite of the 'invisible' space the woman occupies at the end there is no need to abandon her in the 'text' in order to foreground the male characters.

It is the politics of abandonment that needs to be contested rigorously. Such a contestation should be at the aesthetic as well as the ideological levels. To portray the tragic destiny of an individual need not necessarily mean abandoning the individual aesthetically and ideologically. It is this politics of the modernist kind that one needs to expose and challenge at the present juncture.

### III. The Politics of Resistance:

#### *Confronting the Modernist Project*

It is a sad comment on the nature of our times that a film which quite radically offers a challenge to the modern world system has been totally neglected by all concerned. The Tamil film *Adharmam* offers a sharp critique of the modern state and all its hegemonising tendencies. Ramesh Krishnan in his film explores the dimensions of the problems and conflicts the tribals



who stay in the interior of the forests face. The tribals who are 'invisible' to modern society become 'visible' when the politicians, contractors, timber merchants, the forest officials and the police move into the interior areas of the forest to exploit it without any compunction. The argument on the part of these representatives of the modern nation-state that the tribals are looting and destroying the forest is not just ironical, but is also a shameless statement that most people who understand the modern nation-state and its lackeys are familiar with. It is the argument of a system that supports criminals of all hues, and smugglers who form a nexus with them.

*Adharmam* sharply foregrounds the resistance of the tribals who hit back without any fear and maintain that no tribal community in human history has ever destroyed the resources of the forests as modern civilisation has done all over the world. It is not merely a statement of defence on behalf of tribal life, but also happens to be a scathing criticism of the hypocrisy of the modern nation-state and its ways and methods. The tribals, when towards the end of the film a senior police officer asks them to come out of the forest and join the modern mainstream, categorically reply that to leave the forest and enter the modern world system would mean the death of their cosmology and the destruction of their very physical existence. To remain 'invisible' in the forests is the source and basis of their very survival, they argue in unequivocal terms. To become 'visible' to the modern world is to invite disaster and death. The manner in which the leader of the community asks the police offer to return to his crowd is an outstanding expression of the resolve of the entire community to retain the paradoxical scheme of 'invisibility' as life and 'visibility' as chaos and liquidation.

The entire film projects the themes of 'visibility' and 'invisibility' from the point of view of the tribal community questioning the perspective of the modern nation-state. There is, throughout the film, the consciousness that the marginalised people can only adopt the method of resistance and not the means of negotiation if they are ever to survive the onslaughts

of modernity. The tribals, in particular, can look upon modernity only as a force of annihilation that would totally obliterate their cosmological schemes in the name of progress and development. Hence, the imperative to define the notions of 'visibility' and 'invisibility' going by their existential experience.

The triumph of the film is that it subjects to rigorous scrutiny notions of progress, growth and development without adopting the discourse of the dominant sections of society, and, quite significantly, in its unqualified respect for the will and resolve of a marginalised community that refuses to abandon its rootedness. The politics of the film revolves round the intransigence of the tribal community in determining how they wish to remain 'visible', which is most certainly different from the idea of visibility that people most unlike them have.

In times such as ours when hegemonising forces determine the location of communities, cultures and, in fact, all forms of life, the voice of the marginalised comes through most emphatically in *Adharmam* because of its clarity of vision as regards the horrifying experiences of the marginalised sections of our world.

Discourses, of any kind for that matter, only locate the political position of those who construct them and are not independent of serious, at times tragic, consequences that threaten the very lives of millions of people. It is for this very reason that one will have to constantly enquire into the nature of the engagement created by various kinds of discourses. The main attempt in this essay has been to examine discourses from the point of view of the marginalised, the most 'invisible' of all of us. Such an effort is symbolic of the fundamental democratic aspirations of many opposed to the nature of hegemony, and, in an important sense, is a genuine tribute to the will of the truly oppressed and marginalised individuals and communities who refuse to bow down before any kind of tyranny. The distinctions made in the essay are not merely to gain intellectual and ideological clarity, but also serve as pointers to the kind of *praxis* that those trying to resist the domination of the powerful must initiate.





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# Addicted to love:

## Le sabotage of a super-migrant

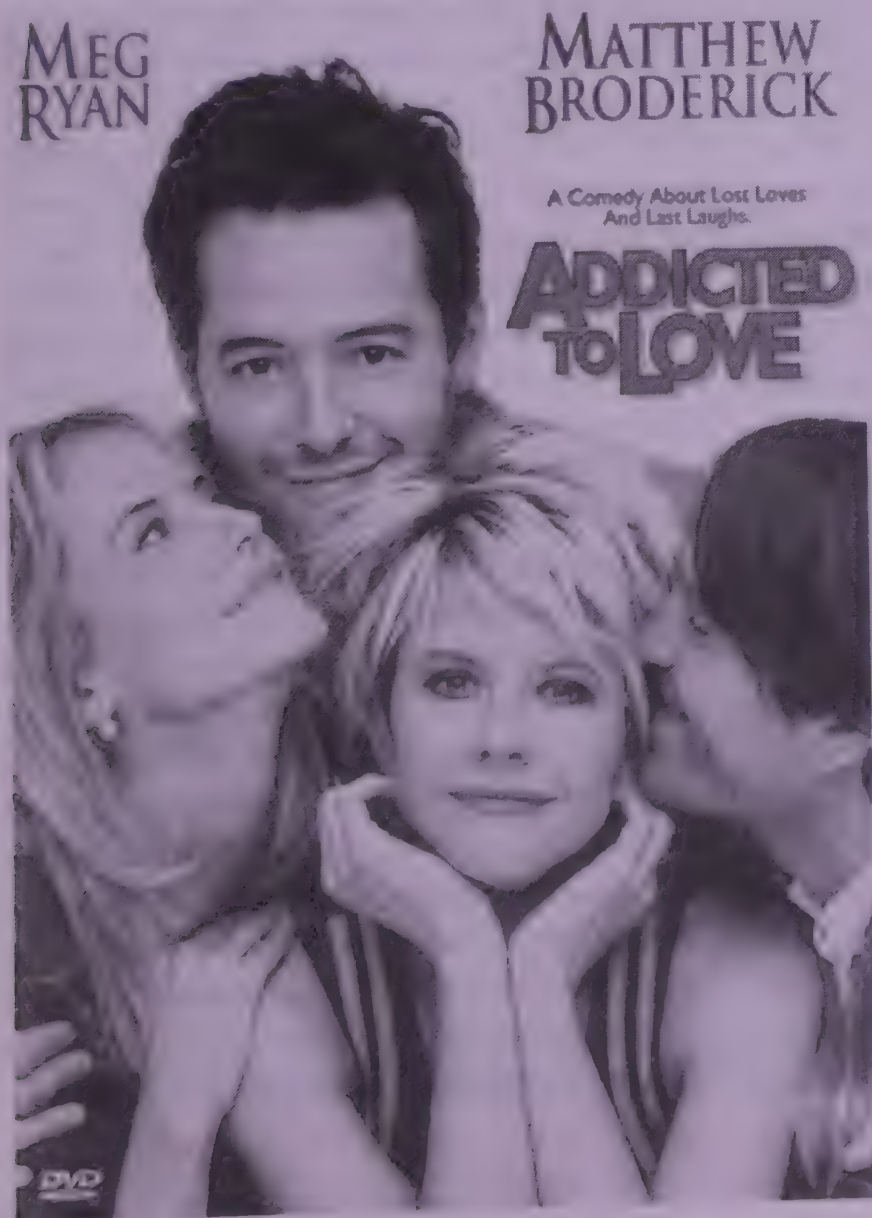
Anne Lhuillier

As a national cinema, Hollywood conveys the ideology of the United States, its nation, which recently follows a conservative trend. According to traditional American values, a good example of a successful individual is one who creates his own business and becomes prosperous, thus showing a meritorious effort fitting most conceptions of the American Dream. This precept in Hollywood films works, especially if the individual is a white Anglo (preferably protestant) male,

but often fails if he is a migrant. The French migrant does not escape this rule. Even though it is not a highly visible group in American society (maybe due to the fact that French migrants do not gather in communities, but rather permeate American society as individuals who often go unnoticed), Hollywood represents the French as much as any other minority<sup>1</sup>. As with any non-anglo mainstream American, the French is systematically opposed to an all-American individual, on virtually any aspect of everyday life. The Frenchman (or Frenchwoman) is often everything the American is not, with the bias directed in favor of the American. Researchers such as Allen L. Woll, Randall M. Miller, William Nerriccio or Bill Nichols have often shown this aspect of Hollywood cinema or American television, which tends to represent out-group minorities with negative stereotypes (e.g. the Mexican

as lazy, as shown by Nerriccio in his study of cartoon character Speedy Gonzales, the Italian as the Mafioso godfather, or the African American as a violent, uneducated 'gangsta' as many Hollywood films represent them and as shown in the works of Woll and Miller). The French therefore constitute no exception to the out-group bias visible in most Hollywood films, even though the particular case of the French has not been studied<sup>2</sup>.

If the culture of the U.S. is, for some, not in the high culture of the arts and the museums<sup>3</sup>, it can certainly be found in front of the silver screen. In the late 1960s, during the Civil Rights Revolution that shattered American identity, films portrayed the "extremes of anxiety, tension, hope and fear undergone in this process of transformation and themselves participated in and furthered the process of social change"<sup>4</sup>. Whereas in the sixties Hollywood showed the social crises and followed liberal trends, the counter reaction has been a return to conservative themes in mainstream cinema. In this perspective,





Hollywood today does not only foster American conservative values by articulating them in new ways, but also becomes the modern expression of American contrived culture, a make-believe reality which keeps the idea of the nation alive and going. Hollywood would then help not so much preserve, but also construct American identity. By projecting imagery that a large group of people will most likely recognize as familiar, Hollywood succeeds in passing ideology, and therefore perpetuates the image society has to itself: "Ideology is how the existing ensemble of social relations represents itself to individuals; it is the image a society gives of itself in order to perpetuate itself"<sup>5</sup>. In today's case, it perpetuates those conservative values that society has come to grow familiar with (individualism, male leadership and capitalism being some examples).

Hollywood is the best expression of what Michael Lind calls American "vernacular" culture, sometimes off handedly referred to as popular culture. Hollywood films are often considered pure entertainment, and its most redundant criticism is the absence of message or content, separating them from the arts. It is however one of the most powerful media in the nation (and beyond) because of its extraordinary appeal to vast audiences. Since its goal is to attract the widest audience possible, its themes must be universal, or at least, national. What target audience does Hollywood seek? Not the minorities. It tries not to offend minorities, and the rule of the "politically correct" is now almost sacred in the institution. The obvious target audience of Hollywood cinema is the dominant group, sometimes referred to as the "white overclass", which stands by traditional conservative values. The sociological context of today's return to conservative ideals is set in the reaction to the 1960's liberal movements, mainly directed towards the revival of group consciousness and the rise of racial preference programs such as Affirmative Action<sup>6</sup>. The reaction to these liberal trends has had the reverse effect and in today's American society translates into a growing distrust on behalf of minorities and migrants<sup>7</sup> and the consequential isolation of the dominant group from

any other embodying a threat to them. The loss of belief in the migrants' will or capacity to integrate into American society, combined with a loss of cultural identity<sup>8</sup> inciting the protection of remaining cultural elements and the view of the other as a threat to this culture have led to the retreat and, as Lind writes, to the "increasing withdrawal of the white American overclass into its own barricaded nation-within-a-nation, a world of private neighborhoods, private schools, private police, private health care, and even private roads, walled off from the spreading squalor beyond"<sup>9</sup>. Between left multiculturalists who encourage difference (and ultimately racial division<sup>10</sup>) and right conservative who have come to fear the "Other" because of its difference and threat to a set of established traditional rules, there is little room for compromise. However, it is between those two positions that the American identity can be seen best, where the migrant is first feared, but ultimately (sometimes after two generations) accepted as part of the whole. No one really totally melts, but no one totally remains apart of society either.

The ideology behind Hollywood is based on ideas attractive to most Americans, namely patriotism (one of the most influential force in the United States) based on customs and historical memories, patriarchal family, community, capitalism, equality, belief in success through hard labor, individualism, a strong sense of morality, and leadership. Those are the prevailing ideas often found in a typical Hollywood film. The latest Pearl Harbor (Michael Bay, 2001) certainly confirms this, based on a sensitive moment in American history appealing to an All-American patriotic feeling, showing a legitimate romantic relationship, and an illegitimate one (the last one must, of course, be annihilated), showing an evil which must be destroyed (after being punished), and ending with a bucolic image of America. Most Hollywood films are based on a classic linear narrative structure (based on the common structure of the tale): ideal situation (order), disruption of the order by an evil force, reestablishment of the order by the male hero (through the destruction of evil).

In a context where the American identity seems to suffer a crisis, Hollywood shows ever-present traditional





fig. 1: Anton confidently talking to a woman, one of his sins.

values. Portraying typical American ideals such as individualistic success through capitalism should be considered a positive pro-American statement. However, if the person praising these ideals is a migrant who succeeds more than the American, it becomes a problem since, according to Hollywood, a migrant should not surpass an American (the latter systematically plays the best part, the hero). In the case of the representation of migration, the migrant or foreigner often becomes the individual creating a problem to an American situation, therefore confirming the marginal place the foreigner has in American society.

In *Addicted to Love* (Dir. Griffin Dunne, 1997), Anton (Tcheky Karyo) is a Frenchman who comes to the United States in hope for a better future. Once a *garçon de café* in Southern France, he is now a successful restaurant owner in New York. His coming to the United States has so far been positive for his personal advancement. However, that is without counting on an American male who does not see things the same way. Sam (Mathew Broderick) is a small-town all-American boy, an astronomer, placing him in the field of the intellect rather than moneymaking business. Sam lives happily in his small American town

(where it is unlikely that anyone would ever see a foreigner), when his soul mate-converted schoolmate Linda (Kelly Preston) leaves for New York and finds refuge in Anton's arms. Sam, convinced it is some sort of astronomical mistake, flies to New York in a last attempt to reason with her and bring her back with him. He moves in across from the new couple's chic apartment in a ramshackle building where he regularly falls through the rotten wooden floor. From there he installs a camera obscura (a device allowing him to see everything that goes on across the street, "live") "just to be with her" and spends most of his time spying on the lovers in a (vain) scientific effort to predict exactly when they will separate. On this forced *ménage à trois* comes in Maggie (Meg Ryan), ex-fiancée of the French lover boy who has now a strong appetite for revenge. Together, the two lonesome souls will try everything to lead Anton and Linda to separation, successfully, until they realize they are really in love with each other.

The film opposes the two couples, but more especially both men on one side and both women (even though more subtly) on the other. Maggie's quest for revenge opposes her to Anton, but her character also develops in relation to Sam's, and occasionally in



reaction to Linda's female characterization. The opposition thus rests clearly between both males, the Frenchman Anton and the American Sam. The reference to the symbolic name Sam (as in "Uncle Sam"—standing for U.S.) already marks the boundary between the American as the insider of a society in which Anton is a migrant, an outsider. As for Anton, his last name (Depeux) forewarns his fate to come, since Depeux ("de peu") means "not much". This is the beginning of a series of oppositions that appear at first to be in favor of the Frenchman, but will later be turned against him, as he must be punished for no other reason than his foreignness.

The film then first sets a series of oppositions between both men that seem to be in favor of the Frenchman: Anton is a successful restaurant owner. The inside of his restaurant looks luxurious, though not excessively. When a food critic comes in, the latter

seems pleased, and had no incident happened (caused by Sam and Maggie, we will develop that later), he would probably have given the restaurant a favourable review. Anton is seen several times outside of his restaurant and apartment, in the streets of New York and in a park. (Fig. 1 & 2); in those scenes, he looks happy and confident (without seeming overly confident or arrogant). His clothes are formal (gray suit), yet fashionable, as expected from a restaurant owner who cares for his professional image. His apartment is roomy and decorated with style (fig. 3), projecting an upper middle-class environment (he lives in New York City where the high cost of living—and lodging—is common knowledge). These material signs—clothes and apartment—indicate that he does not live in the margin of society, but rather lives well and comfortably in a middle-class environment.

Fig. 2: a French migrant in New York: confidence and happiness







Fig. 3: Anton's apartment in Manhattan : image of a successful migration

Anton is not a burden for society. His migration to the United States has been profitable; his skills (cooking) have helped him become a successful business owner, indicating that he has integrated into American society successfully. In that sense, Anton embodies some ideals often referred to as typically and traditionally American: "achievement-oriented individualism" (in Eisenstadt's words), capitalism (single business owner).

Sam on the other hand was a successful astronomer before he decided to go to New York City for sentimental reasons. Once in New York, he spends most of his time looking like a homeless, unshaven, wearing the same clothes practically all through the film, and finding new schemes to get back to Anton. At one point, he decides to befriend Anton to see him from closer. He goes to his restaurant to be hired as a dishwasher, therefore placing him in the working class and Anton as his boss (Fig. 4). This situation is the reverse to what most people would expect: Anton being the migrant, Sam being the American, the latter should be the successful business owner, and the former work for him. This temporary reversal of fortune won't last for long, as Sam and Maggie will make sure to put him

where he belongs as a migrant: down. This perspective however temporarily puts Sam as "anti-American" since instead of moving up in the ladder of social success, he has moved down. He has not embraced individualistic "achievement-oriented" ideas (and the promise of success through capitalist principles) as Anton has, and therefore, the latter has succeeded where Sam has failed. Sentimentally, he has lost his girlfriend to this other man, for the same reason that Anton is at the top of the ladder Sam is trying to climb. Sam: "You think women want men for their money?" Anton: "No, not just money, power also. And success. Don't fool yourself dishwasher, they want a man who takes what he wants". This line reproduces the old sexist stereotype about women and their so-called desire for manly power. No matter how anachronistic, the line is delivered by the man who has the power and gets the girl, to the "dishwasher" (his social place is made clear by his 'title') who has lost the girl, lost his job (wilfully) and ultimately lost his place in a typical American middle-class society. From a peaceful middle-class life in Small Town, U.S.A., he moves to a working class environment, lives in an abandoned



tumbledown building and befriends Anton's ex-fiancee Maggie, herself an estranged member of middle-class society: she claims to be a photographer but in the film she devotes her talent to photographing Anton's misery and is never seen performing any sort of professional task.

The opposition between both parties being thus set, the favor being clearly on the Frenchman's side, what happens to him to justify his reversal of fortune? How and why does he go from "hero to zero"? This expression is borrowed from the movie *The Mask* (dir. Charles Russell, 1994) where the protagonist, a common man, becomes an eccentric and popular character with the help of a magic mask, therefore going from "zero to hero". Interestingly, Stanley (Jim Carey), a typically shy American man like Sam's character, becomes temporarily French thanks to his mask and then becomes extroverted, like Anton, able to openly seduce the woman he loves secretly when he is 'the Common Man'. This episode confirms the

Frenchman as a character more secure about himself than the American, especially, when it comes to matters of the heart (or of the sex). The Frenchman is indeed often portrayed in Hollywood as a sexually active man. Anton will be no exception. The social difference, as well as the material and sentimental advantage that Anton has must be turned around. Every aspect of his life will be sabotaged. Sam and Maggie will thus become Anton's nemesis, embodying "the goddess of retribution, the avenger of pride, the punisher of passion, the equalizer of fortune and misfortune" (Encyclopedia Encarta 1999). This is precisely what Sam and Maggie will do: punish Anton's passion (in the modern form of sexual desire) and get even with him for all the suffering they feel he has caused. The first aspect of Anton's life that will be put to the test (which he will inevitably fail) is Linda's love. By means of ingenious resources (lipstick on a kissing monkey and expensive women's perfume in kids' squirt guns), Sam and Maggie plan wickedly on how to induce

Fig. 4: Displaced roles : the migrant as the boss, the American as the worker





separation between the two. When Linda finds the lipstick on Anton's collar, after the monkey attacked him, she laughs when he explains the strange circumstances under which the lipstick ended up on his shirt. The second time, when faced with the perfume, Linda becomes even more suspicious, especially after hearing the equally strange story of kids shooting expensive perfume with squirt guns in the middle of a New York park. Sam and Maggie set the final touch in Anton's very apartment, placing spurious bills from florists and other gift stores, and a woman's intimate garment in the couch. After Linda faces him with the "proof" of his betrayal, he confesses. And takes everybody by surprise, Sam, Maggie, and the audience. This technique allows the audience to stop sympathizing with Anton (if it ever did) and makes him an even more reprehensible character. The justification he gives to Sam (his befriended dishwasher) does not help his case: "I only slept with her to help the loan for my restaurant. It's not like I cheated you know. It was only once with this woman. I hardly came at all, just a fraction of what I am capable. I thought of Linda the entire time". This explanation makes Anton sound even more macho (and stupid) than he already is, proves that he indeed does use women and sex for his own personal advancement, and puts doubt on his integrity as a man. Linda thus leaves him (as the audience applauds) to find refuge in Sam's arms. This passage indeed puts the audience against Anton (especially considering that the audience of romantic comedies is mostly feminine) and makes sure that no one will come to pity him.

The second aspect that Sam and Maggie will destroy is Anton and Linda's privacy and soon appropriate their identity. Sam and Maggie, by spying on them with both image (camera obscura) and sound (Maggie bugged their apartment), deprive the couple of their intimacy. The voyeuristic gaze of both Sam and Maggie allows them to penetrate the couple's private life and eventually take over their identity. First, the gaze from across the street allows Sam and Maggie to follow the couple in every move they make, to hear everything from their everyday talks to their intimate night life. But soon,

that will not be enough. They want to penetrate physically the space they live. They break in their apartment, and after moments of bitter sweet remembrances of respective sentiments for their ex-partners, Sam and Maggie appropriate the image of their ex-partners: Sam dresses as Anton, Maggie as Linda, then both look at a photograph of Anton and Linda, as an ultimate encounter with each other. This mirror image (Fig.5) shows the real motives behind Sam and Maggie's actions: they do not want so much to be with their ex-partner as to experience the love that both Linda and Anton seem to know. They want to be them, not be with them. Sam wants to be Anton for everything he has and he doesn't, Linda being merely just one "item". Maggie would like to be more like Linda, be more feminine, more sensitive; may be she feels she failed as a woman because she loved and felt loved by Anton and then realized he did not love her. One tends to look at people who have succeeded where one has failed with both envy and jealousy. At one point in the film, Linda and Maggie are both alone in their respective apartment, "together" (separated by a street), and the mirror shot (both women do the same thing—drink a glass—at the same time) from Maggie's perspective indicate that the latter looks up to Linda. The reversal of identities not only indicates that Sam and Maggie are confused (emotionally and personally), but also that they want to deprive Anton of his identity, by transposition. Another indication of this is a later scene in which Sam and Maggie are watching their favorite show, Anton and Linda, who are having guests at their apartment. At one point, the latter are talking, and Sam and Maggie, having turned off the sound, dubb them. This appropriation of speech is a further indication of Sam and Maggie's appropriation of their expartner's identity.

A third important aspect that Sam especially wants to sabotage is Anton's social and material success. As we have pointed out, Anton lives comfortably in a large apartment and is a successful restaurant owner. Sam, if he wants to destroy Anton, must destroy him materially. Maggie steals his credit card and spends huge amounts of money with it, therefore engaging





Fig.5. Sam and Maggie appropriating Anton and Linda's identity

Anton in some debts he cannot overcome. He becomes bankrupt and most of his furniture is taken away by his debtors: his nicely furnished apartment empties as Anton watches angry and powerless. The other material achievement that 'Sam must counter is Anton's social success. As his dishwasher, Sam is able to spy on Anton's professional life and act whenever the opportunity strikes. That is what happens when a food critic walks in Anton's restaurant. Sam, seizing the opportunity, drops dozens of cockroaches in the kitchen, soon spreading in the restaurant itself (and the food critic's plate), causing customers to run away in a scream. The restaurant is then closed down by the Health authorities, contributing ever more to Anton's social and material deprivation. If the primary motive can be seen as jealousy (Sam's primary emotion towards Anton), it would be simplistic to see it as the sole motivating force. Anton is a migrant. He has succeeded economically and socially. Sam, because of Anton (and his meeting with Sam's fiancée Linda), has had to give up his job as a successful astronomer. He went to New York and since then, has had to have

beef jerky and Twinkies as his menu principal and to live among cockroaches in a rickety building. In the meantime, Anton is sipping vintage wine, eating refined cuisine and is living with Sam's dream woman. As a migrant, he has successfully integrated into American society, but because of this status, he has caused an American to suffer (emotionally and socially) and must therefore be punished. His place in American society must be set clearly: you might succeed in our society and become acculturated, but there will be a price to pay. In Anton's case, two avenging agents who think they must do justice destroy every thing he successfully does in the United States (this is also an indication of the importance of retribution in American imaginary).

The last aspect that Sam and Maggie will destroy is Anton's physical appearance. At the beginning of the movie, Anton is portrayed as an attractive, elegant man. The audience soon learns from Maggie that he was a model, therefore attributing him a positive physical impression (even though this is a highly subjective, matter, the fact that he was a model labels him as attractive, according to occidental criteria of



commercial beauty). After Sam destroys Anton's restaurant, the latter hopes to be able to make a little money with his looks (as he used to do). Maggie takes care of this possibility by placing strawberries to which he is allergic in his pillowcase at night. The next morning, Sam, just dropping by at the moment when Anton's debtors take his furniture away, discovers a rash. (Fig. 6). In fact it is a very strong allergic reaction that will soon cover his entire body. The modeling career being out of the question, and Anton having lost what was left of his self-esteem decides to go see Linda (who has by now left him and lives in a hotel). Sam accompanies him. The scene of Anton in the street is especially powerful because of the way he dresses: afflicted with a rash, he decides to hide himself as much as possible. The result is Anton looking more like an old, poor, homeless woman than a wealthy young man, which departs symmetrically from what he is, and the way he was portrayed at the beginning of the movie (fig. 2). In this scene, Anton wears a raincoat, a scarf

and a hood, hiding enough to make a point about his appearance (he wants to hide it), but showing enough to make him look pitiful (fig. 7). The opposition between the young man look and the old woman appearance reinforces the fate Anton has to suffer in order to pay for his so-called crimes. However, his fate does not stop there. As if it were not enough, Sam accidentally pushes him in a staircase, breaking his ribs and his arms, "almost killing him" and causing him to wear a cast from the belt up. This last touch on Anton's character has the effect of making him look feeble and powerless. The fight (even though Anton is already partially paralyzed) that comes after he realized that his dishwasher is really Linda's ex-boyfriend and that he is partially responsible for his mishaps (just how much, he does not know) has the sole purpose of "finishing Anton off". Anton is then shown pitifully crying, Sam looking at him (fig. 8) and Maggie as well, from across the street, saying "There you go" to Anton as she finally reaches satisfaction (she got even) and as Anton reached the bottom (fig. 9).

Fig.6: Anton's disfigurement and his torturer







Fig.7: Sam accompanies Anton, now looking more like an poor old woman than a wealthy young man. This image is symmetrically opposed to the confidence that Anton showed at the beginning of the movie.

In the end, the only crime Anton has visibly committed is to cheat on Linda. However, that was not the reason why he was being punished in the first place since the protagonists did not know about it. Anton goes from “hero to zero” because he has committed two crimes in the eyes of the American protagonists (both male and female). Toward Maggie, he has committed a crime of love, for leaving her after they moved from France to the States, therefore placing him as a “user”, an opportunist “who hurts people” (Maggie claims that he used her to obtain permanent residency in the United States.) In Sam’s case, Anton not only has taken his girlfriend away from him (even though as an adult, she freely chose to be with Anton and was at no point forced to do so), but also has taken much more. By becoming his boss, therefore putting Sam socially beneath him, Anton has proven more resourceful, and in the end, more successful. One

cannot help but think that it is for this reason, because he is a successful migrant, and furthermore, a successful Frenchman, that his life is being sabotaged. The nationality is not an accident. The main reproach formulated towards Anton is his sexually deviant behaviour. Early in the film, his sexual abilities are made clear by Maggie who claims “French men are very small, but not this guy. It’s like Godzilla’s tail, you could take down Tokyo with that thing”. Hollywood has a history of portraying Frenchmen as sexually active individuals (see *Monsieur et Madame Dupont vus par Hollywood ou la representation des Français dans le cinéma Américain* by A. Lhuillier), in which Anton is just one example. If that is not a reprehensible fact in itself, Hollywood’s portrayal of it turns it into a revolting attribute because it opposes a moralistic and conservative ideology. Sex in mainstream American film cannot be shown, but merely talked about. In



such a context, the Frenchman has often been portrayed as a sexually expressive individual, opposed to a sexually repressed American. Addicted to Love does not constitute an exception. Anton is being punished for having had an affair, and this is precisely in this domain that both Sam and Maggie are trapping him. Anton's character can thus be seen as Don Juan, a man who seduced and used women and was punished for it. In the first version of Don Juan, *El Burlador de Sevilla* (Tirso de Molina, 1630), he seduces a military commander's daughter whom he defeats in a duel, but soon is dragged to hell by the ghost of the commander. In the second version (*Don Juan Tenorio*, by Jose Zorilla, 1844), Don Juan is not punished, but redeemed by love. Both versions apply to Anton as he is being both punished for his sexual misbehavior and forced to go through a living hell, and redeemed by Linda's love at the end. However, he is being set up on other aspects of life: social and material status and physical

appearance. All those aspects are to be put in relation with Anton's status as a Frenchman, but more generally speaking, as a migrant. In a memorable scene, Anton compares himself to Superman. Sam, curious about Anton's reasons to migrate to the United States, asks him why he left France. Comes the following answer: I was never so much French since I've been here. You know Superman? That's me. I'm Superman. And France was like Krypton. You know on Krypton everybody was Superman. You make a nice sauce, everybody make a nice sauce. You say hello to a nice woman with your French accent, everybody says hello. But here on Earth, the moment I arrived, I knew this was a place where I had special powers. I talk about my little town and bankers open their checkbooks and say how great, charming and exotic you are Anton. I could read the phonebook to a woman and they become hypnotized, wet as morning daisies. Here I have these powers, back home I was nothing. Hip Hip America!

Fig.8: Sam above Anton, asking him to confess his sins, whereas the Frenchman is physically and morally reduced, already paying for sins he does not know he has committed.







Fig 9: This image shows the ultimate price Anton has to pay for being a migrant : humiliation, pain, suffering and judgment by individuals whose social position should put them hierarchially above Anton, but whose "addiction to love" has put them under. Ultimately, Anton should have been addicted to love, as the stereotype associated with the French indicates. Instead, he chose to be a successful businessman, a place usually reserved for Americans. The film shows the impossibility of such a reversal.

Land of freedom. Now you, you're not French, but it's ok you know you still have opportunity in this country. Yesterday you had no job, no future. Today a step up, a little step but a step. Soon you can afford a place to live and get a girlfriend.

This discourse, which sounds like a parody of immigration propaganda inviting people to come to the U.S., seems out of range with the rest of the film. Here is a migrant who tries to become acculturated to American society, perhaps through some disputable means—some bitter members of this society would even claim that it is precisely what makes Anton an integrated member of the business world—but except for this episode, Anton is a reasonable, honest man. There are movies in Hollywood where a man betrays his girlfriend, and does not get “punished” as much as Anton does. There is something else in Anton, other than his sexual conduct that makes him an unwanted member of society. If we eliminate the sexual

conduct as the reason for his misfortune, there is nothing left than his social status as a migrant to explain it. His nationality precedes him, and because of the stereotypes already at work in the American imaginary, his being French, instead of helping him as he thinks, betrays him.

The analogy with Superman is doubly interesting. First it confirms Anton as a Don Juan figure through another analogy. *Man and Superman*, by Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1903), which is a play version of the Don Juan legend.

Secondly, if we consider the motion picture *Anton* is referring to (directed by Richard Donner, 1978), when Superman first arrives to earth, as a child, he is rejected by his peers because of his difference. As an adult, he has to hide his super-self behind a man-next-door facade, a man who is not only common but also extremely shy. People respect Superman because of his good actions, but are also afraid of him and his



power. In this perspective, Anton, to be accepted, would have to keep a low profile. The Mask also shows this. Stanley (Jim Carey) is a shy American man. When he becomes the Mask (a kind of superman), he becomes extroverted, which is excessive for the American woman who prefers the sensibility of a shy man. Stanley therefore has to throw away his mask at the end, stays his old self and “gets” the girl. The same is expected of Anton. If he has all the powers he claims to have as an exotic migrant, he should not be allowed to show so much confidence. Anton is a confident man. He does not keep a low profile, as perhaps would be expected of him as a migrant. When Sam first enters his restaurant to be hired, Anton refuses his help, taking him for a tramp, practically throws him out on the pretense that he does not like his face and tells his bartender (in French, thus creating a complicity that excludes the American) that he is not going to accept any homeless who walks in. Later on, after having hired Sam, Anton punches him in the face, having recognized Sam as the homeless who once attacked him on the street (at the beginning of the movie, Sam and Maggie set Anton up on the street to steal his credit card. Sam ends up punching Anton in the face). This defensive movement places the Frenchman as a strong-willed man who is not willing to put up with other people’s problems. A migrant, as an outsider of society, is expected to integrate it. Most of the time, the outsider position is a disadvantage; it can even deny access to certain goods and services: Proposition 187 in California (1994) denied public services and benefits to illegal aliens; behind ideals of unified American national identity, the proposition hides real racist issues and national identity questions<sup>11</sup>. However, in Anton’s case, being a migrant brings him success, power, money, and emotional satisfaction. In the eyes of an American common man, this can be considered unfair, as people such as Roy Beck might claim. Anton not only seems confident, but Sam himself considers him as a “god”, therefore putting once again the emphasis on Anton’s hierarchial superiority, as opposed to Sam’s. The Superman discourse and the condescending tone Anton uses to

give hope to Sam (“you’re not French, but it’s ok. You still have opportunity in this country”) indeed give a sense of things gone over turned. This is reversed to what is usually seen in hollywood’s films since the American is always the protagonist and the one hierarchially superior to other minorities. However this particular film does not constitute a liberal alternative to that state of things. The whole film is seen from Sam and Maggie’s perspective (both Americans), and the audience is led to sympathize with Sam, not Anton. The film deliberately reverses the order only to show how strange it looks when that happens. By putting Anton on a pedestal and making him more successful than Sam, the latter can bring him down better, and lower. The American should be on top, the migrant underneath. It could even be safe to say that Anton’s misfortune is inversely proportional to his success. For every success Anton experiences, Sam causes an unfortunate event to counter this success.

In the context of New York City, being a successful business owner should be respected and valued, if the owner is American. If the owner is a Frenchman, a nationality with which the American imaginary already has a history of love and hate, envy and repulsion, then being a successful individual (in all fields) becomes a problem, a problem that Hollywood can fix with all impunity. It is commonplace in cinema to say that whoever kicks the dog is the villain. Why? Because people sympathize with dogs, which are defenseless and innocent animals. If a protagonist kicks a Frenchman, is he a villain? No. He’s a hero. Sam is the protagonist/hero of the film. Indeed, apart from spying on another man, invading his privacy and his home, destroying his business, ruining his relationship, stealing from him, and almost killing him, Sam is a perfectly acceptable individual, sweet and gentle, the perfect American citizen. Sam does not suffer more than what he does to himself, and no one punishes him at the end for doing all those things to Anton (especially since up to the last fifteen minutes of the film, the latter was “innocent”). He vaguely shows some remorse that looks more like self-pity at the end, when Anton rightfully asks him: “Who the hell do you



think you are to judge?” His answer, “I’m nobody, Anton. Nobody to nobody” sounds more like a whining “nobody loves me and somebody loves you” than a real apology. Maggie on the other end goes to see Anton, shows him the strawberries and tells him: “Say we’re even.” Then, she ironically asks him “How have you been?” This line qualifies for the most ironic line of the film, since Maggie has been spying and ruining his life as much as the audience knows. Both characters show no visible remorse for ruining this person’s life. There is no apology, and certainly no punishment for the two avenging individuals; on the contrary, they too, as well as Anton and Linda, benefit from a happy ending. Interestingly, popular reviews of the film (found on the internet) reflect the negative opinion about Anton and portray him as the “bad guy”. “Tcheky Karyo is perfect as Anton. He is, well, repulsive. That’s all there is to say about him. You can’t really manage to pity him, even after all his mishaps. He not only took Sam’s bride away from him, he is also a French chef. Worlds collide, i.e. the USA and France. This can only go wrong”<sup>12</sup>. This indicates the level of misunderstanding and distrust there is between both nationalities.

Hollywood, behind the genre of romantic comedy, hides a powerful message about its minority migrant population. Anton is redeemed at the end because of Linda’s love and the tradition of happy ending, but also because he cannot fall any lower. As Sam puts it, he lost every thing he has: “love, money, self-respect.” The punishment for being a French migrant is in fact the ultimate test to integrate into the American society. As we have pointed out, morality plays an important role in American mostly conservative society. Traditional values are given a lot of importance, and it seems that the real “entry test” resides only through punishment of not having followed these values (and how bad, or how well the person being punished reacts to it). Hollywood has a tendency to favor America’s dominant against the minorities. In this sense, it reflects a populist nationalist point of view about a fear of the other or the different. Hollywood’s portrayal of migrant individuals follows that trend and tends to

either destroy them (Addicted to Love is an example of that) or send them back where they came from, such as in the hit comedy Green Card with Gerard Depardieu as a French migrant who is at the end deported by the Immigration and Naturalization Service because of his fake marriage to an American woman (Andie MacDowell) to obtain the permanent residency. There is a definite possibility to succeed as a migrant in the United States, but the price to pay is seeing one’s image painted negatively, as is the case with the French people, but also any other minority. The case of the French is not as sensitive an issue (because of the relatively low profile French migrants have in the U.S.), which allows Hollywood to treat the subject of migration in a light, humorous way. But it may in fact be representative of the sensitivity of the issue of migration as a whole; the choice of the French may then only be another facade behind which Hollywood can hide its conservative ideas towards more sensitive migrant groups such as Hispanics or Asians.

As much as some researchers claim that the United States has lost its identity or is not a nation-state, Hollywood might be the one American institution that shows the fallacy of such a claim. Hollywood, as it seems, might indeed be the institution that best keeps the American unified nation alive, and by showing an ever dominant white anglo population—and an ever dominated minority and migrant population—secures the place this part of the population holds as the main governing and influencing power of the United States.

## Notes

1. My doctoral dissertation isolated fifty films, from 1923 in which the Frenchman is represented: ranking from Chaplin’s *Woman of Paris* (1923) to *Lost & Found* (Jeff Pollack, 1999), from *Pepe le Pew* (Warner Brothers) to *Lumiere in Walt Disney’s Beauty and the Beast*, from musical classics *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951) to *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957), from the war films *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944) to the action films *Bad Boys* (Michael Bay, 1994) or *Ronin* (John Frankenheimer, 1998), from *Ma & Pa Kettle on Vacation* (Charles Lamont, 1956) to *European*



- Vacation (Amy Heckerling, 1985), or from sci-fi film *Close encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) to post-nuclear fantastic *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998). The 2000 children hits *Rugrats in Paris* or *102 Dalmations* show that the sentiment Hollywood holds either pro or against French is still actual.
2. See Randall M. Miller (1978) *Ethnic Images in American film and Television*. (Science Press: Ephrata), Randall M. Miller, ed. (1980) *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups* (Jerome S. Ozer: englewood, NJ), Allen L. Woll and Randall M. Miller (1987) *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television: Historical Essays and Bibliography* (Garland: New York), William anthony Nerriccio, "Autopsy of a Rat: Odd sundry Parables of Freddy Lopez, speedy Gonzales, and Other Chicano/Latino Marionettes Prancing about Our First World Visual Emporium." *Camera Obscura* 37 (1996) pp. 188-237 and Bill Nichols (1981) *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*. (Indiana UP: Bloomington). For the particular case of the French, see "Anne Lhuillier, monsieur et Madame Dupont vus par Hollywood ou la representation des Francais dans le cinema American. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Louisiana-Lafayette, May 2001.
  3. See Michael Lind, "Are we a nation?" *Dissent* 42, Summer 1995. p. 359
  4. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1988) *Camera Politica: the Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington)p.7
  5. Bill Nichols (1981) *Ideology and the Image* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington) p.1
  6. Born in the 1960s, Affirmative Action's goal is to increase opportunities for minorities by favoring them in hiring and promotion, college admissions, and the awarding of government contracts. This policy has been largely controversial since its beginning until today and has even been abandoned in the State of California with Proposition '209(1996) ending any preference based on gender, race, or ethnicity for jobs, state contracts, or admission to state schools.
  7. The case of migration has become increasingly sensitive since 1965 and the new Immigration and Nationality Act. This act has changed the aspect of the migrant population by abolishing the old quota system and favoring family ties. This has led to a substantial growth of the number of migrants per year. According to the National Research Council, a consequence of this legislation has been the decline in the labour market skills of new immigrants and the change of the origin of migrants, from Western Europe to Latin and South American and Asian countries. This new type of immigration has also contributed to an increasing distrust in migrants, as Roy Beck for instance points out. See National Research Council, James P. Smith and Barry Edmonston, editors (1997) *The New Americans* (National Academy Press: Washington, D.C.) and Roy Beck (1996) *The Case against immigration* (W.W. Norton: New York).
  8. This was best shown by Harold DeRienzo, "Beyond the Melting Pot: Preserving culture, Building community", *National Civic Review* 84, winter 195.
  9. Lind op.cit.p. 362
  10. Left 'multiculturalists' see the United States as a "nation of nations, a federation of nationalities or cultures sharing little or nothing but a common governemnt" and define the components of the American population on the basis of five races: white, black or African-American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Inuit. They favor a nation of diversity or plurality in which groups should keep their particularities and not lose them in a melting pot. This definition is doubly problematic: first it confuses race and nationality. An African migrant from Senegal has in fact little in common with an African American born and raised in New York, Chicago or New Orleans. Even though they are of the same ethnic group, they do not share a common history. However, if the Senegalese migrant stays over a long period of time, he might become American—he will probably become Americanized before that—but still won't share more than ideas (or ideals) with members of his ethnic group. Second, this definition divides the population on the basis of race and ethnicity, a concept that is becoming problematic to define as intermarriages grow. Furthermore, dividing groups along lines of race and ethnicity can be dangerous. The early 1990s events in former Yugoslavia have shown how destructive such divisions can be. The multiculturalist trend has taken the (just) Civil Rights claim for equality a step further, now claiming a positive recognition of difference based on ethnicity. Whether it is to make a positive point that ethnic particularities should be recognized, or to make a negative point of pejorative distinction, the claim of difference does not call for equality, which is what the democratic goal should be.
  11. See Tara M. Lennon, "Proposition 187: A Case Study of Race, Nationalism and Democratic Ideals," *Policy Studies Review* 15, Summer/Autumn 1998, pp. 86-88.
  12. See Monika Huebner, Review of *Addicted to Love*, dir. Griffin Dunne. Internet Movie Database 1997. <<http://www.imdb.com>>.



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# The Theme of 'Dark-ness' in Cinematography

Sunny Joseph I S C

## Prelude

Let me start with talking about two things that I experienced today. When Vivanji started his video film on the Calcutta installation, he immediately shouted, "It is too dark." We stopped the projection, increased the brightness and then, everything was washed out! It was the opposite, it was too bright. Then we stopped the screenings again, and changed the element of darkness/brightness within the frame. Finally we realised that there is only one optimum level of tonal values as intended by the filmmaker, which will without doubt give/attribute the right meaning to his image. In fact this is a rare paradox. The darkness/brightness duality within a cinematographic image is simultaneously mutually exclusive as well as mutually inclusive.

The second incident was when Rahul played his music. Most of us closed our eyes and listened to it. It is true that whenever great music is played people tend to close their eyes. Does the feeling of darkness, by closing our eyes connect us to a primordial womb like experience?

One of the meanings given to the word 'dark' in the dictionary is, ignorant, unenlightened; My attempt here is to take on a small journey to explore the realms of imagination and image creation. No ultimate truths, but an attempt to communicate with all of you.

Narayana Guru once [1920] placed a small notice at the place of a gathering of world religious leaders: "Not to argue and not to win, but to know and to inform". I believe that this understanding will be a beautiful basis for any kind of dialogue.

As a cinematographer I believe in the power of images. I am also concerned about how an image is used in a

particular context. The knowledge about our world today is transmitted more with images and as 'image makers' working in cinema, we cannot escape from the sociopolitical and philosophical questions as well as the aesthetic questions, of the process of creation and use of the images. Until now, 'mythology' had a great role in the evolution of culture and societies. In the new millennium it will be 'Imagology' which is going to be decisive in the evolution of a new man.

All through my student days and even now, I stand in awe of the power of the moving images. I am always surprised about the ability of the human eye, 'the persistence of vision'. When did this ability originate in human physiology? Does this ability in any other way help the evolution of human species? Why this trait did not disappear from the species? 'Persistence of Vision' must have been present even in the cave men! These are some questions I am constantly asking myself in wonder. In the distant past, the predominant sense organ for knowing our reality was the eye and vision itself was an integral part of the endeavour. What the eye saw could be described, catalogued, and even subjected to mathematical analysis. Plato's [350 BC] awe of eye and vision was stated thus: "Vision in my view, is the cause of greatest benefit to us, in as much as none of the accounts now given concerning the Universe would ever have been given if men had not seen the stars or the sun or the heaven. But as it is, the vision of day and night and of months and circling years has created the art of number and has given us not only the notion of time but also the means of research into the nature of the Universe."

Now, as we have seen earlier, the best way to experience a near to 'dark-darkness' experience is to shut our eyes. Of course a permanent closing of our eyes would be the experience of the ultimate darkness—death. Or is it the beginning of the ultimate experience of light? Who knows? If I were not to be attending this seminar, I was to attend another seminar in Trivandrum—again on darkness, another kind of darkness—'suicide'. Any way it was nice of the doctors to invite an artist to be in dialogue with them, as we are doing with writers, music directors, painters and directors.



Coming back to the theme of darkness, the first thing I did was to put the word 'darkness' in yahoo search and click 'go'. The search gave at least more than 16000 sites related/referred to the word darkness. My aim was to find out about what would be the very first account/description of darkness in literature. That will also connect me with the main theme of our seminar 'word to image'. And as far as I could gather the information, by all probability it is in "Rig Veda", in the hymn of creation. "In the beginning darkness was wrapped [hidden] in darkness". To Begin with, in creation..."There was only darkness wrapped in darkness". But paradoxically in cinematographic creation darkness is wrapped in light. We are in fact talking about a 'Visible Darkness'.

### Nature and essence of "Darkness"

I asked Sudheer: What is the 'theme of darkness'? Will it be primarily the element of filmic viewing experience or of the practice of the creation of the image; of the lighting—'chiaroscuro' or of the darkness used to focus or of the darkness used to hide, or is it darkness as a matter of low budget/NFDC regional-film look/elementary vs abundance/spectacle/lack of darkness in the mainstream films etc?

Sudheer answered: The theme of 'darkness' is an abstract quality of nature, matter, time, light, emotions, nostalgia etc. etc; perceived differently by different people and artists/artforms. I think the 'darkness' in the discussions, as you perceive as an artist and a cinematographer, might not be a political note. I am not sure let me put it very crudely, as one of the ways... [How do you react to a script of a film/scene which has night, evening, dark day interior etc, in different ways and what is the thought process before you get down to the numbers [of stock & foot candles etc.]. It will be this mental process that will lead to the calculated cinematographic image..."

And we cinematographers, in the darkness of a studio shout "Lights On." Much before us, within the fathomless 'great void', someone wished: "Let there be light".

People around the world seem to feel that darkness precedes light. Darkness is somehow older, more

primitive, more fundamental, and light penetrates a darkness that was there before it. 'From non-being lead me to being', says the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 'from darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to immortality'. For the Jews and Arabs, the Germanic People, the Clets and many others, each day begins in the evening—the night comes first and the light afterwards. Similarly at the very beginning of things: 'at first', according to a creation hymn in Rig Veda, 'there was darkness and God said, "Let there be light". It was only after making light God went on to fashion his other creations.

Some people, however, have maintained the opposite tradition, that the light existed first and darkness came later. One explanation of why this happened is that the Creator grew weary of endless light and created darkness for relief from it. Or some say that light and darkness have co-existed from the beginning. In China the two great opposites of *Yin* and *Yang* correspond to darkness and light respectively. According to a Scandinavian myth, there was a great abyss of emptiness, which was charged with magic power. To the south of it was a realm of blazing heat and to the north a realm of freezing darkness. It was the meeting in the abyss of ice from the north and sparks from the south which made life, so that creation resulted from the mingling of the opposites, of light with dark and heat with cold.

Among the first experiences of a baby must presumably be the sensation of coming out of darkness into light, and all our lives-long, one of the fixed characteristics of our environment is the alternation of light and darkness, on which we pattern the basic rhythm of our lives. In daylight we are active, at night we turn off our conscious energies and go to sleep. Light let us see, darkness walls us in, makes us blind, groping and afraid. The light and heat of the sun bring nature to life in the spring, the winter comes in with darkness and cold.

As a result, light naturally means good, activity, creativity, spiritual vision, while darkness means evil, fear and doubt, inactivity, sterility and spiritual blindness. What is done in the light of day is open,



public, innocent; but what is done in the dark is secretive, furtive, harmful or shameful. The crowing of the Cock at the first glimmer of dawn puts to flight the evil beings, which infest the night.

Let us now try to visualize, try to recollect images / Frames corresponding to the meanings given to dark darkness. Then let us try to apply the meaning back to a moment in a given story and identify the elements within an image, which will create that meaning!

### Dark adj.

1. a) entirely or partly without light  
b) neither giving nor receiving light
2. giving no performance; closed! this theatre is *dark* tonight.
3. a) almost black  
b) not light in colour; deep in shade
4. Not fair in complexion; brunet or swarthy
5. hidden; secret
6. not easily understood; hard to make clear; obscure
7. gloomy; hopeless; dismal
8. angry or sullen, responding to criticism with dark looks
9. evil; sinister
10. ignorant unenlightened
11. deep and rich, with a melancholy sound.

### Dark.n.

1 the state of being dark 2 night nightfall 3 a dark color or shade.

### Dark Vt. Vi. - to darken

In the dark uninformed; ignorant keep dark to deep secret or hidden darkish, adj. darkly, adv. darkness, n.

Before I joined the film institute, I read one article written by James Broughton, an experimental filmmaker from America. He tells us the story of a young boy who wakes up in the middle of the night and cries out:

“Turn on the lights, I want to see my dreams”  
and I thought that it was me, and I joined cinema.

In the cinematic experience there are two realms in which we can observe the ‘theme of darkness’. They are the viewing experience in a darkened cinema hall and the use of tonal values from black to white to represent forms/images.

The experience of darkness, shared in a cinema hall is unique in its revelations. It is the most primordial, womb-like and cave-like experience we have. We are unified in the ‘dark void’ with expectations and wonder. Probably, it is also the most secular experience we have today available in the society. Within the enlightened darkness, rays of love and wisdom, even subverts the power of money. [“Money is the alienated human ability”

*Karl Marx.*

Hugo Munsterberg, in his 1916 classic book “The photoplay a Psychological Study”, wrote about the power of cinema: “The massive outer world has lost its weight, it has been freed from space, time and causality, and it has been clothed in the forms of our own consciousness. The mind has triumphed over matter and the pictures roll on with the ease of musical tones. It is a superb enjoyment which no other art can furnish us.”

Immediately after the first screenings of Lumiere Brothers, a critic emphatically wrote of the new invention: “Death is no more an absolute Truth”

Let us now look at the element of darkness within a photographic image as the variations in tonal values: On its own, darkness [black] or brightness/lightness [white] are formless. Mixing of light and dark create forms/images. [We can refer to the practice in cinematography by two terms: contrast ratio and lighting ratio].

### Light / Dark Relationships

Every element in an image has a specific brightness. One area will be seen as bright, another will be perceived as dark. The visual ‘weight’ of different brightness levels will depend upon proximity, area and contrast. The eye is naturally attracted to the highlight areas in a frame, but the contrast and impact of an object's brightness in the frame will depend on the adjacent brightness levels. A shot of a polar bear against snow will require different compositional treatment than a polar bear in a zoo enclosure. A small bright object against a dark background will have as much visual weight in attracting the eye as a large bright object against a bright background. [Consider portraits of great masters]. The difference in the brightness



levels within a frame plays an important role in balancing the composition.

For John Alton, the definitive Hollywood cameraman of the 'film noir' genre, black was the most important element in the shot. The most important lamps for him were the ones he did not turn on. The high key/low key mood of the frame will dictate the styles of composition as well as the atmosphere. A few strong light/dark contrasts can provide very effective visual designs.

Strong contrast creates a solid separation and good figure/ground definition. When size is equal, the light/dark relationship plays an essential part in deciphering which is figure and which is ground. Equal areas of light and dark can be perceived as either figure or ground.

The boundary area of a shape often relies on a light/dark relationship. A figure can be separated from its background by backlighting its edges. A highlight in the frame will attract the eye and if it is not compositionally connected to the main subject of interest, it will compete and divert the attention of the viewer.

## Harmony and Contrast

Although, perception seeks visual unity/harmony, a detailed visual communication requires contrast to articulate its meaning. Morse code can be understood if the distinction between dot and dash is accentuated. A visual image requires the same accentuation of contrast in order to achieve coherent meaning. Light, by supplying contrast of tones, can remove visual ambiguity in a muddle of competing subjects, but a wrong tonal contrast can produce a confused and misleading 'message', the dots and dashes come close to the same duration and are misread.

## Communication

Communication is achieved by contrast. The communication carrier—sound or light provides a message by modulation. There is a need for polarities whether loud or soft, dark or light, dot or dash. [Or in this digital age presence or absence]. Meaning is made clear by comparison.

Light is the perfect medium for modulating contrast. It illuminates the subject and therefore the carrier of

the message. Lighting technique, as applied in cinema, balances out and reduces the contrast ratio to fit the inherent limitations of the medium. It therefore contributes in the drive towards perceptual equilibrium by catering simplified images. But light is also needed to provide modelling, contrast and tonal differences. In this sense it introduces diversity and contrast while identifying meaning.

To many, it is also the very fundamental principle of existence. In the Chinese Taoist philosophy, it is described as the : *Yin and Yang*. *Yin* n. [dark] the feminine, negative, dark principle in nature, which interacts with its complement and opposite, *Yang*.

*Yang* n. [bright] the masculine, positive, bright principle in nature, which interacts with its complement *yin*.

One thing I want to tell you is about the use of 'islands' of darkness and brightness, each used to emphasis the opposite. We see it used a lot in Moorthy Sab's work, like in '*Kagez Ke Phool*', '*Pyassa*', '*Sahib Bibi or Gulam*' etc. In one of Vivanji's paintings this technique was used to emphasis the ethereal morning light on the face of a young girl, with the island of dark clouds behind her face.

Let me also talk about a few things. The finest tonal differentiation occurs in our own eyes. That makes the eyes best suited for easy communication and it makes the eye most powerful. In India we even make the eye more evocative by applying kajol. It is no wonder that the only one advice, Wajda gives to cinematographers, is : "don't forget to light the eyes of your actors and actresses." Another concept is about islands of darkness and brightness used within a frame to enhance the opposite. Few other things I would have liked to talk here were:

- Fade-in and Fade-out used as to indicate the passage of time
- Use of shadows on the faces in a night scenes and day scenes
- Light used as to create hidden, dark spaces as used in thrillers
- Use of backlight as an 'invisible light' in the representation of absolute darkness.



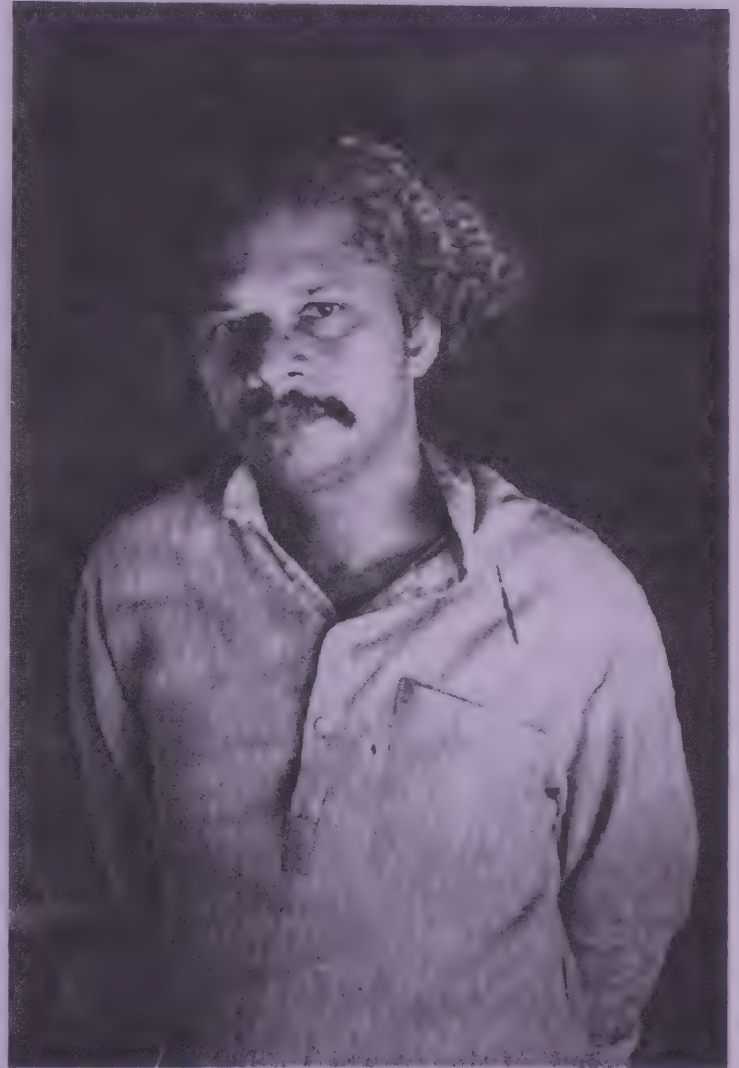
# Of Life... On Films...

Adoor in conversation with Venkiteswaran

**B**orn in 1941, Adoor Gopalakrishnan started acting on the amateur stage at the early age of eight. Wrote and directed over twenty Stage Plays during his academic career. A graduate in Political Science and Economics, he joined the Film Institute in Pune after a short stint of employment with the Kerala Government and got his diplomas in Script writing and Direction in 1965. One of the leading lights of the New Indian Cinema, Adoor pioneered the Film Society Movement in the State of Kerala and started the country's first film Co-operative, Chitralekha for the production, distribution and exhibition of quality films.

He has scripted and directed eight feature films and more than two dozen Shorts and Documentaries. Each of his feature films has won top national awards. His first film, *Swayamvaram* went on to win National awards for best film, best director, best cameraman and best actress. His last film, *Kathapurushan* also won him the national award for the best feature film. He has won national award for best director four times and best script writer thrice. His films have been shown in every important festival including Cannes, Berlin and Venice. Adoor's third feature, *Elippathayam* won him the coveted British Film Institute Award for the most original and imaginative film of 1982. The International Film Critics' Prize (FIPRESCI) has gone to him five times successively for *Mukhamukham*, *Anantaram*, *Mathilukal*, *Vidheyan* and *Kathapurushan*. In 1983 the Government of India conferred on him the title of Padmashri in recognition of his contribution to Indian Cinema. His collection of essays, ***The World of Cinema*** got the national award for the Best book on Cinema in 1984. His pioneering work in the Film Society Movement has gone a long way in creating a better film culture in his home State. He has served on International film festival juries in Venice, Hawaii, Singapore, Sochi, New Delhi, Brussels, Alexandria and so on.

A complete retrospective of his films was held at the French Cinematheque, Paris in 1999. Other important retrospectives include the ones at the Lincoln Center, New York (1994), La Rochelle, Pesaro, Madrid and Fribourg. He has also been



honoured with tributes and homages at the film festivals of Helsinki, Denver, Munich, Nantes, Alexandria, Figuera da Foz, Manila, Houston etc. Following is an interview with Adoor by C. S. Venkiteswaran.

**What are your earliest memories of sight and sound?**

One of my earliest memories is of a boat ride in the night. Someone had come to inform my father of my aunt's death. I was five or six years old and we were staying at my father's office quarters, which was in an island in the backwaters. We started then and there by boat. The water all around us was calm and still and it



bore a faint reflection of the night sky lending some faint idea of light and sight. The sound of the oars falling on water is still vivid in my memory.

Memories of the past have something to do with tragedies—pain, insult, loss, grief, I think...

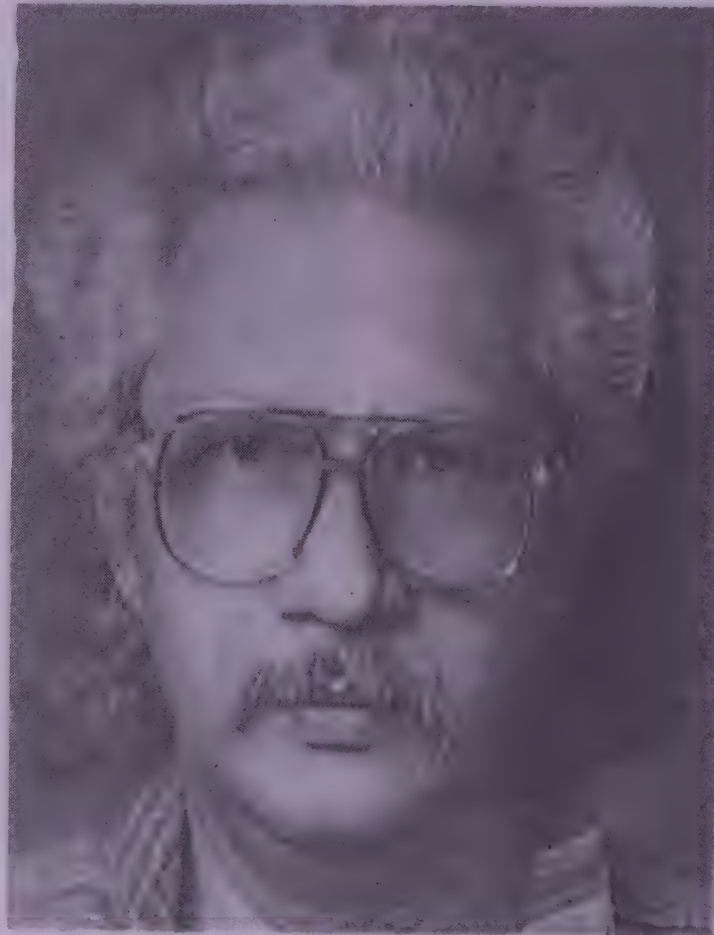
When I was a child, I was a good marksman. I was adept at aiming at any mango or cashew fruit and bringing it down with stones. Once, while I was going to school, I saw an owl on a tree. I don't know what came over me. I aimed and threw a stone at it. And it dropped to the ground dead. This painful memory has stayed with me since then and still haunts me. There are many things in life that you can't repair later.

Our house was in the middle of a large garden with a variety of trees—mango, cashew, coconut, arecanut, jack-fruit, tamarind. There was hardly any tree I had not climbed. Once on top of the tree I would forget about the laws of gravitation. And naturally it was normal routine for me to fall off them. As it became a regular affair, my mother kept a dish of herbal oil handy so that she could take it with her every time she rushed to the spot where I hit the ground with a big thud.

Animals, birds, trees and plants were all part of our life. We had cows, dogs and cats, all called by name. They were part of the family. I remember an incident concerning one of our dogs (we called him La Fayette)—old and infirm—and everyone thought he was about to die. He had almost lost all his hair and was always dozing in some corner of the house. One day he chanced up on the lehyam (ayurvedic medicine)

kept out in the courtyard for sunning. Before anyone noticed it, he had lapped up the whole of it. My mother had got it prepared for my sister who was resting after delivery. In a couple of weeks, to everyone's surprise, the dog started growing shiny hair, and to regain his lost youth. A perfect testimony to the efficacy of the lehyam!

**You are very fond of Kathakali and have made several documentaries on Kathakali artistes like Gurū Chengannur and Kalamandalam Gopi. Was Kathakali always there right from your childhood?**



There were regular performances at my ancestral house. Our family were patrons of Kathakali for generations and we had our own Kaliyogam (Kathakali troupe). There were artistes in the family too. A cousin of my mother was married to an all-time-great Kathakali singer. One of the three husbands, all brothers, of my grandmother, had taken to magic as his pastime. While he proved himself a patron and connoisseur of arts the other two took care of mundane matters like managing the farmlands and attending to regular litigation of sorts.

My earliest experience of Kathakali is that of watching it from my mother's lap. For my mother Kathakali was almost part of her daily life. So, even as a child, I developed a liking for it as I watched it in performance and listened to my mother as she explained what was happening on stage to the women sitting around us.

In those days, at my *taravad* (joint family house), we could watch a number of Kathakali performances—



both with make-up and costume and also without them (Cholliyattam). On any special occasion like an elder's birthday, a performance was an essential item. We had the basic unit (a troupe comprising of performers, accompanying instrumentalists, trainees, singers, greenroom hands, gurus etc). We only had to gather the 'stars' as guest performers as is the general practice even today. The costumes and headgears my uncle had got made were of high quality. Whenever the legendary Krishnan Nair, who was a rising star in the Fifties, had any performance nearby, he used to insist on borrowing these very ones. Those days the glittering parts of the headgear were made out of the shell of insects like the blue beetle, not gilt paper as it is done now. Their glow in the light of the oil lamp was very unique. A number of labourers used to be sent out to the fields to hunt for blue beetles every time a head-gear had to be got made. But the tragic part of it is that I grew up in a period when all this was considered worthless. What was considered 'worthwhile' was western theatre. So, we spent our time reading, studying, writing and

producing such plays. We were always looking towards the west. I feel it was a great loss. It was thrust upon us that proper theatre should have unity of space and time. And we were totally convinced of that, no doubts or hesitations. So, Kootiyattam or Kathakali did not mean much to us. We had acquired different yardsticks of quality judgment, and these arts questioned such rigid conceptions of space and time.

**Curiously, one doesn't find any kathakali performance in your films.**

True. I have only shown the performers getting ready in Kodiyettam, and never beyond that. That also, very contextually, just to show a transformation—a man transforming into a female character.

**I think your approach to films is deeply influenced by Kathakali, its basic elements and mise en scene that combine rigorous delineation of characters on the one hand, even while maintaining the possibility of improvisation during performance. So in a way, it is very much open and also rigorous at the same time. This, I feel, is a characteristic**

*Kalamandalam Gopi*







*Kalamandalam Gopi*

of your films also, especially the way you present your characters and organize your scenes...

May be it is there in an indirect way.

For eg. when a pacha character comes on stage, his 'character' is very much defined. But in actual performance, it is the narrative context that determines expression, and the possibilities for improvisation are infinite. This precision about characterization is present in your films also, I think...

May be. After all, what is a character? A character is revealed through actions and reactions and the inevitable interactions (and also the lack of it) with others in given situations. There is possibly no other proper way to reveal it. All human situations are dramatically potent. So if the person who faces it happens to be plain wooden in nature without any potential for attitudinal changes, how would a credible and interesting development result? The lessons of the past as well as the fresh encounters of the present go

on to define his place in the sun. There can be no single prefabricated approach in these matters.

Yes, the most popular characters in classical arts like Kathakali or Kootiyattam are all villains like Ravana or Bali, and seldom the satvic characters like Rama. For satvic characters lack drama and conflict in their personality, and as a corollary, in their representation.

Yes, they are also the most colourful characters. It is a red 'thadi' and 'kathi' that shines on stage rather than the satvic 'pacha' characters. But paradoxically, only those who play the pacha characters become 'stars'. People admire a Gopi more than a Ramankutty Nair, despite the visually spectacular and colourful presentation of the villains or demons in Kathakali.

Unlike art forms like the Japanese Kabuki, the presentation of which is more spectacular, Kathakali requires the minimum of properties and sets. You can perform it anywhere with the minimum of resources and stage settings.



Recently I made a film on Kootiyattam—the oldest living theatre in the world—for Unesco. It was basically an effort to document the theatre art form. A three hour long film resulted though I had shot almost ten hours of it. But then they wanted a smaller version of 10 to 15 minutes duration. It was not impossible, but was not fair to the art, I thought. Instead, I suggested they watch any 15 minutes from the film. That would be more in keeping with this theatre art that takes a few weeks to enact an Act.

**This great performance tradition of Kootiyattam and Kathakali, where there is infinite freedom to improvise, where time and space is fluid, has all this helped in developing a 'malayali' film idiom or language?**

I haven't analysed my films on those lines. But I believe that such a culture is part of my works and runs as its undercurrent.

Kathakali engrosses me completely. While watching a performance, I forget everything else—the external world, all the personal problems... There is hardly anything in it that relates to the present and there is no effort at being realistic. I think the percussion and the ambience as a whole transport us completely into a different world. And it has always been such a creative stimulus for me. Here each role is being defined anew by the actors each time they perform it. Now Gopi is defining how a Nalan should be. Earlier it was Krishnan Nair. Tomorrow it will be somebody else. It keeps on changing and evolving.

**And there is never a performance that is 'the' performance making the act of recording often irrelevant.**

Yes, that is its greatness. The problem with recording is that it would be taken for the norm. One of the great qualities of our culture is that nothing is staged or performed with a view to be preserved. Every performance is for that evening. Tomorrow it will be created again.

Once I went to Kadammanitta to watch Padayani. In the late evening they were all busy painting makeshift masks and making the costumes and those huge and

spectacular head gears. All that is done on fresh arecanut sheaths and tender coconut leaves lending the make-up a certain ethnic authenticity. They take on a special glow in the light of the oil torches. Once the performance is over, those headgears and perishables are simply discarded. That night, when I came away I brought some of the masks with me. But after a day or two, they just withered and shrank. A Padayani performer doesn't have to create anything for preservation. He is confident that he can always create it anew, anytime, and always afresh. It is a great concept. Take our 'kalamezhuthu' for instance. We draw this colorful and wonderfully intricate **Kalam** only to erase it at the end of the ritual. This obsession with preservation is totally western—this idea of plucking something from its natural context and keeping it. For us it is part of a continuum. Our climate is not quite kind to the idea of preservation either. These torrential rains and sultry summers don't allow any kind of preservation. It destroys and in turn replenishes too. A summer would dry up everything. But rains would give everything a rebirth.

**Has contemporary Indian art lived up to this heritage?**

The question is whether we are aware of a heritage that is all our own. Whether we look beyond the present and the recent. Also do we really consider even the everyday phenomena around us seriously?

For example take the crow. Ours is a lifetime association with this ubiquitous bird. There is no event in life where this bird doesn't have a signification. Its crowing signifies the arrival of visitors, birth, death, betrothals—everything in our life.

Or take the coconut tree—a tree that is closely linked to our lives. Everything about it is significant. Its position in relation to the house, its girth, height, slant, the rings on its trunk and so on. Then think of the house—lizards. Their droppings, the 'tche - tche' noise they make, their own falls—a set of meanings and relationships are associated with it all. The cow and various other domestic animals are all inextricably intertwined with our lives and fortunes. So all these motifs form a natural part of our views and attitudes on life and hence films as well.



The hooting of owl is associated with a particular time of the day. Likewise the mood and temper of a situation can be suggested through bird and animal sounds. The crow is an interesting bird that way. There are crows that yearn to sing like other birds. I have listened to them with sympathy and understanding and I must say that they were quite sweet. Once I heard a caged mynah imitating the crow struggling to croon like a bird in all sarcasm!

And then there are the natural phenomena like the rain and the sun. All my films have rain at some point. I feel that the film is not complete without a rain. Maybe to set a mood, an ambience, to suggest something. The effort is to evoke the associations these elements resonate in us.

In my films I have used crows, dogs, house-lizards, and other birds in various ways. I don't know if everyone understands it. But still, it is part of my way of story telling. For example in *Mukhamukham*, there is a scene in which the head constable takes the liberty of demanding tea to be served. He is not a welcome

guest and is told that there was no milk left in the house as the calf had finished everything. At that moment the bleating of a calf is heard in the background. An audience familiar with rural life would immediately realise that the calf is bleating for its mother's milk and the head of the household was simply lying to the constable.

#### **What about the dimension of space?**

The use of space within the frame of a shot and also in the film as a whole should positively be influenced by our architecture. The composition of a frame is not just a casual decision. It is something that is deeply related to the ambience of the living space. In our commercial films, it is a common sight that two rival characters are often shown together in close proximity simply because they have to be accommodated within a frame. It is a total negation of any respect for space and the advantages inherent in it. Ideally, space should have kept them apart. There are a lot of such things, like the way you use topography of a particular place etc. The objective is to make the viewer feel. The point

*A door with Camera*







*Kodiyettam*

is not in what you see or hear but in what you are made to see or hear. The visuals we see and the sounds you hear lead you to something beyond their sum total. We need to be reminded of other things constantly. But the tragedy is, even the most sensitive of viewers don't expect much from films. This is because they are constantly being exposed to such trite and trivial things on the screen where the facade hides an interior that is not there.

**Have you ever felt it as a conscious challenge, the attempt to narrate differently as against the Hollywood or Western ways? For example take the kite sequence in *Kodiyettam*, a delightfully lengthy sequence, which is pure cinema with no diegetic immediacy to it. And there is also something very much Malayalee to it.**

It is pure abandonment, an expression of leisure and also typical of Sankarnkutty's rudderless life. It can only

happen like that, for the film has an episodic structure. It is devised in such a fashion as the film would look natural and as if there was no intervention from outside. No visible drama, no major issues or conflicts, and the pace is unhurried. I have used no background score in it either. Most viewers didn't even notice it. In the background, I have used the sounds of almost all the common birds and animals in Kerala—the crow, the owl, the cow, the dog, the elephant.

Coming back to the question of cultural specificity, the same sound may signify different things to people from different cultures and lives. So a certain 'lived experience' is vital to the understanding of a film in all its details and complexities.

We enjoy Japanese films because we already share a common culture with the people of Japan. We think we understand western films because we have been prepared for it through the colonial rule, English



education, spread of Christianity and the wealth and resources of the West. But coming to think of it, hardly any serious effort is made even by critics in the West to prepare themselves for our films—they are just films from the third world. And everything is subsumed by that abstraction, 'third world'. One can see the difference in the approach of critics who have visited India at least once and those who haven't had any such exposure.

In our all out effort to equip ourselves with things that are modern and imported, we have lost a discerning audience for our own works. In the past, Kathakali and Kootiyattam survived and thrived because a community of discerning and devoted home audience was there all through. When our meaningful cinema loses such an audience, that is reason for alarm.

**May be this is a universal phenomenon when a monoculture is hegemonising the world and all the so-called little cultures are being swept away.** Yes, today we tend to think that only money-grossers matter. In the process we are losing our own identity. It also leads to a situation where the 'small' cultures are made to think of themselves as inferior cultures.

It is a fall-out of the colonial psychosis, this inferiority complex. In Malayalam, we have so many books and articles on Bergman and Kurosawa. We don't have as many even on Ray. This is fine as long as you don't consider our own works in the language of lesser importance. But unfortunately, we don't even bother to teach our children their mother tongue. The problem lies not in the exposure to the wide world outside but in our attitude and the wrong lessons we learn from it. Appallingly, it is inhibiting us rather than opening up.

**Either way—that of imitating the west and trying to beat them at their own game, or to presenting ourselves as esoteric, are dangerous.**

The idiom of cinema is also undergoing transformations with the changing times. There is no question of keeping a static position. This is not to say that we should pander to the irreconcilable tastes of the audience as the commercial filmmakers claim. A lot many amongst us are living in an illusory world. They claim to be living in a fast world. But where is speed in

our life? It is there only on TV or in MTV where images flicker fast and faster. In a place where the electrical power supply is frequently interrupted, how can life be fast? This speed we are talking about is totally artificial, like our popular heroes and villains, their costumes and vocations.

**Maybe it is precisely this make-believe, the exaggerations that we enjoy.**

If you confuse that for the real, you are actually negating life itself. Not surprisingly, a cinema that deals with life as we live and truth that we value attracts fewer viewers. Only a discerning audience can create good cinema. Take for example, our film criticism. Even the critics don't approach cinema seriously.

**Was it there in the seventies when you were beginning to make films?**

No, it was not there at all. In fact what we were trying then was to create an audience by taking good cinema to the colleges and universities. It is from there that change should come. One feels sad to see college students lapping up trash and becoming unquestioning consumers. They would even ridicule serious cinema. Media has played a very negative role in this. They have branded alternate cinema as boring, coining phrases like the 'indolent pace of art cinema'.

**Were you fond of films when you were a child?**

Not much. Actually I could have seen a lot of films if I wanted; my uncle had a couple of theatres at Adoor, Enath and Parakkode. But I was never an ardent cinema fan and I never ever thought that I would work in cinema. From the beginning I was more involved in theatre.

**Have you also acted?**

Yes. I first acted in a play when I was eight. It was during a school function (marking the birthday of Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal). The play was written by one of my teachers and I played the role of Sri Buddha in it.

Outside the school we had a group of friends. We used to write and enact plays, usually in front of elders at home. They all used to come and watch our plays. They took us really seriously. For, in those days of joint families, it was not usual for children to get





any serious attention of the elders. Now I think they get too much attention and are pampered.

**How did you get interested in plays?**

From childhood, I was interested in literature. During my schooldays I had membership in every library in our region. I used to read all kinds of books. We also started a library of our own and an arts club.

**What kind of plays did you do at school?**

At the primary level, most of the plays were imitations of the plays I saw. There was nothing original in it. We had a group of three boys of the same age. It was called the RNG Company (R for Ravindran, N for Narayanan and G for Gopalakrishnan). We met at the cashew grove on weekends. Each one will climb atop a cashew tree with a note-book and pencil and around lunch time, everyone will get down one by one with his creation—short story, poetry, play or anything. And then we would discuss them among ourselves.

**What kind of plays interested you while you were a college student?**

Mostly socials. We have staged the plays of Thoppil Bhasi, S L Puram etc. and I have got good many prizes while in school.

While I was studying in Gandhigram, I did a play

titled **Aniyara**. It even went on to win the best prize at a theatre festival. It was an interesting play about an amateur group; getting ready to stage a play. All the action is in the green room, and ultimately, the play fizzles out before it gets staged. What we see in the play is the green room and the stage is behind, unseen. It was a novel concept then, later a lot of plays came out with similar themes.

I also wrote a few full length Plays during that period. Two of them got published: **Ninte Rajyam Varunnu** and **Vaiki Vanna Velicham**, one was published while I was studying at the Film Institute, and G. Sankara Pillai wrote the preface for it. Later, I felt I should never have published them. It was out of one's desire—typical of my age—to see one's works published, to win recognition as a writer.

Theatre was my first love. And I had also staged a number of plays while in Trivandrum before I joined the film institute.

**Any memorable events in your college days?**

I used to do Plays regularly. I had even played female roles while in college!

One good memory I have of that period is of poet G. Sankara Kurup coming to our college and delivering



a lecture. I have never heard such fluent, poetic speech. It still rings in my ears. It was a great experience.

**Were you involved in student politics?**

No. There was not much of politics in the campus then.

**What was the mood of the times before you graduated?**

It was a period of hope, optimism, nation building etc. I can't explain why. But from the beginning, I was attracted to Gandhi and I became a great admirer of the values upheld by him. Maybe it grew out of listening to the elders or reading newspapers. Another hero was Bose. There were always these speculations about him, "If only Bose were here, things would have been different". Nehru was not that glamorous then. May be because he was already in the seat of power.

**Gandhi finds a recurring mention in *Kathapurushan*.**

**Has Gandhian philosophy influenced your aesthetic approach? I feel that one could glimpse such a strain in your films, for example in the economy of means employed, the stoic approach in the *mis en scene*, the avoidance of frills etc.**

It may also be the result of my theatre experience. As my cinematographer Mankada Ravi Varma has observed, on the sets, I am ready to do everything myself, instead of just ordering others about it. Even today, I am not averse to do any work; in fact, I find pleasure in it. Maybe I owe it to Gandhi. For he taught us there is dignity in doing any work. Another element is that of self-respect. We have become a people who lack it totally. May be it is due to the national experience of the fifties when we lost all our morale—we were a country begging for alms all over the world.

We are poor, poor in our attitudes. We repair the same drains and build the same culverts every year. This, I think, is a sign of poverty.

**Theatre-wise it was a period when playwrights like Thoppil Bhasi and movements like KPAC were dominating the scene. To become a Gandhian during that period sounds strange.**

Thoppil Bhasi arrived a little later. He was from my neighbouring village. He was a hero those days. It was only in my college days that I first saw a Play by Bhasi though. It was **Mudiyanaya putran** (The Prodigal

son). And I remember having gone to see him in the lock up at the Adoor Police Station where he was detained in connection with the Sooranadu uprising. Clad in a single mundu, he looked unimpressive, like any other man, a common criminal or a petty thief. Not an image that suited a hero of contemporary legends! Later when I met Bhasi I told him about it.

**You were acquainted with Sankara Pillai during your college days?**

I was doing my BSc in Pandalam College. In the middle of it, I got admission for a course in Rural Administration at the Gandhigram Rural Institute in Madurai. It was a three year course. G. Sankara Pillai had just joined there as a lecturer. He was a great source of inspiration to me. He had single minded devotion to theatre. His life and approach to art was a great lesson that one should not do things half heartedly.

**Why did you switch to that course?**

There was an assurance that once you complete it, you will get job as a Block Development Officer. And I could not resist the temptation. I think it was 1957.

**Did you do Plays at Gandhigram too?**

No, but I could read a lot. There was a good library there (G. Sankara Pillai was in charge of the library and he did the selections). Till then my reading was mostly limited to Malayalam. It was there that I was able to read Plays and books on theatre in English. Till I joined the Film Institute I used to read a lot of Plays, that also in a very systematic manner. At that time I behaved like an authority on theatre. I had read almost all the available books on theatre.

**Were you able to watch theatre performances?**

No. There were no opportunities to watch Plays. I had chanced to read some of the manuscripts of Plays by G. Sankara Pillai. Even after I joined the Film Institute, my interest in theatre continued. For the whole of the first year, I was still reading Plays there. **Waiting for Godot** came out around that time.

**While you were in Madurai, did you watch movies regularly?**

I went to see movies, but not very frequently. I used to like Sivaji Ganesan films. I had seen most of his films



during that time. Everyone admired him. All those films with names starting with 'pa' by Bhim Singh like, Pasamalar, Pavamannippu etc. came out then.

#### **After you passed out of Gandhigram?**

Immediately after that, I was employed for two months in the Bharat Sevak Samaj in a slum service project. Then I got a regular job in the National Sample Survey as investigator.

#### **In Trivandrum?**

Yes, the zonal office was in Trivandrum, but I had to travel all over Kerala as part of my work. It was interesting work as it gave me an opportunity to travel and live in distant and remote parts of the State. Most often I used to stay in someone's house or in tiny rooms



atop shops. The pay was good, about Rs 600/- per month. In those days a college lecturer used to get only Rs.120.

Then slowly I started to hate the job and wanted to leave at the first opportunity. What I came to dislike was the lack of dignity that the job entailed. Even if I did a good job, my immediate boss the Inspector would find some fault, which irritated me. When it became routine, I thought it was time to quit and save my self-respect.

Moreover the job was also making my theatre work difficult. I would be preparing the production of a play when I am asked to go to Malabar. Above all, my mother fell ill at that time, and I wanted to be near her. And instead of posting me somewhere here, they sent me away to Malabar. My initial excitement of getting a job and becoming an earning member of the family was all gone by then.

#### **And it came in the form of Film Institute?**

Actually I wanted to join the National School of Drama at Delhi. But the medium of instruction there was Hindi. I was not very proficient in Hindi. Only those who knew Hindi could join there. Just then, I accidentally came across an advertisement inviting applications for a course in Screenplay Writing & Direction (I saw that paper when I was having a cup of tea at a teashop opposite Chengannur bus stand). I thought Screenplay writing was similar to Play writing, for I had some experience in that. I applied and got selected. In those days you had to go to Pune to appear for the entrance exams.

The institute was started only in 1961 and it was the second year. K. A. Abbas was chairing the selection board. I got the first rank and the only scholarship that was available (Rs. 75 per month). Then, with the money I had received as gratuity and other benefits from my previous employment (I had served there for about an year and a half), the first thing I did was to buy a portable typewriter, and a book—'Teach Yourself Typewriting'—by Pitman.

We had a teacher there, Prof. R. S. Pruthi. He was a brilliant teacher who was thorough with dramaturgy and his classes in script writing were stimulating. He wanted us to write one screenplay a week, which



I didn't find difficult because of my experience in theatre.

The typewriter was very useful in this regard. It helped me a lot in later life also. All the initial office work for Chitralkha Film Cooperative was done on that. Later, I replaced it with an electronic typewriter and now a PC. I know both English and Malayalam typewriting and this comes in handy in office work and scripting.

#### **Were there any other Malayalees in that batch?**

There was John Sankaramangalam in my class and the late Devadas and a couple of others in the technical departments. Only a few of my batch mates completed the course, many of them left in the middle for various reasons. And of the ones who successfully completed the course, very few made films. One of them worked for his whole life as a first assistant in Bombay. No risks, and good payment. Some of the others made one or two films before quitting. John Sankaramangalam joined there as faculty. Many years later, I became the Chairman of the Governing Council while he was the director.

There are a number of Film Institute students who have never been active in filmmaking. They come with great hopes there and after watching all those classics they feel small, often lose confidence to do anything on one's own. Only the self confidence, the conviction that you also have something to say, can help you to survive.

#### **How was life in Pune?**

It was a hard life. I had to live on frugal means. The meagre scholarship amount had to be supplemented with money orders from my elder brother back home. The Institute had a very good library. So after the classes I spent most of my time there. In the second year Ritwik Ghatak came as teacher. Things turned dramatic with his entry. But I have never met any teacher outside the classroom. I was also a very shy person and it was difficult for me to make acquaintances.

For one full year I stayed in a simple State Government hostel not far from the Institute paying a nominal rent of Rs.10 per month. During my second year I found myself shifting to a better abode, the outhouse of a private bungalow called 'Nikunjam' and

sharing the room with a University student from Maharashtra. In the third year I shifted to 'Gurukripa' sharing a room with Devadas.

It was only after joining the Film Institute that I ever touched a still camera. When I was handed one as part of my practical lesson, I did not know what to shoot. And after a lot of deliberation I did click with apprehensions. To my great surprise, the result was well worth the doubts and hesitation. The teacher liked it a lot.

During weekends I went to down town theatres to watch vintage Hindi and English movies; they had special shows at half the rates! That is how I caught up with most of the old Hindi and Hollywood films.

#### **Anything significant during those years?**

My mother died in my first year at the Institute. In those days it took almost two days to reach home. By the time I arrived, everything was over.

#### **What about the student community there?**

Most students came from an urban background. And students like me felt pygmied, for I was not very articulate in English then. Most of the Malayalee students have this problem, even today. In a way it is good, I think. It makes one work inwardly. There is a conflict between what you have and what you show. It is good for an artist's development not to be too facile with spoken words.

During the second year I still remember two students, Asrani and Mani Kaul who came there together to join the acting course; Asrani continued with the acting course, while Kaul switched to direction.

It is curious that many students who show great promise while studying at the institute seldom make it once they go out. Maybe they don't really try.

#### **John Abraham joined the institute later?**

Yes. Though he was older than me, he joined the institute later. Pavithran was studying at the Law College nearby. He was a regular at the film shows in the Institute.

#### **What about the teachers?**

There were some teachers who were really good. Ghatak was one. Then there was Prof. Satish Bahadur, who was a Marie Seton discovery.

#### **Ghatak must have been a great presence?**



Actually many people do not know that Ghatak came to the Institute through the recommendation of Satyajit Ray. It was Ray who prompted Indira Gandhi (who was the I & B Minister) to appoint him there. Ghatak was going through bad times then. By that time, he had already done his major works. His reading was wide and he was well versed in Sanskrit texts like Vedas and the epics. His lectures, especially on his own films, were inspiring. Similar is the case with his insights on Ray films; he had great admiration and understanding of them. But ironically, what got greater currency were his casual remarks during his drunken bouts.

**What was your diploma film about?**

It was titled 'A Great Day'. A humorous film on a lazy man on the day his fiance's father was to visit him. He is so lazy that he never bothers to clean up his room or venture to do anything to put things in order. He had even developed an ingenious device to collect the milk bottle in the morning without getting up from the bed. On the great day, though he tries his best to tidy his room, he is not able to gather himself to do it. His would be father in law comes and goes, and he sits

depressed only to be informed by his joyful fiance that her father liked him. He is aghast! Then she tells him, 'He liked your smile, especially your teeth'. Her father was a dentist!

**After the completion of the course, the natural destination is either Bombay or Chennai to work in the film industry. What prompted you to come back to Kerala?**

There was no doubt in my mind as to what I should do after graduating from the Institute. I wanted to come back to my own land and make films. Even while in the Institute, I was planning a lot of activities in Kerala. It was then that the All India Writers Conference was convened at Alwaye. M. Govindan was one of the organizers. During our discussions, he suggested that the conference could have an international film festival also as part of it, and he wanted me to organize it. I gladly accepted the responsibility. And we organized a festival of films from all over the world for one week in nine towns of Kerala, at all the district headquarters simultaneously in January 1965. It was the first international film festival in Kerala and was received





well. I had prepared a detailed brochure and set the theme of the festival as setting up of film societies. In fact we were trying to create a future audience for quality cinema. The idea was to start a film society in each of these places. The first, Chitralekha, was inaugurated in Trivandrum in the month of July. Many film societies came up as a result of this. It was like preaching the gospel of cinema.

**Chitralekha was formed then?**

Chitralekha had taken shape in 1964 with a three pronged approach: set up film societies, publish film literature and make quality films. The Chitralekha Film Souvenir, the first ever serious publication on cinema in the language was brought out that very year. The idea was to make a comprehensive intervention in the film media. On the one hand we wanted to show classics, discuss them and publish writings about them. On the other we wanted to distribute and produce films. For the latter we decided to establish a studio of our own. Chitralekha succeeded in all these.

**In the early days of film society, was there an enthusiastic crowd to watch films?**

Viewers were very few in number. We used to arrange the screenings with great difficulty, financial and infrastructural. We didn't have a permanent venue to screen. Each screening was held at different places. And even when you arrange everything, only a handful of people came to watch them. People thought it was madness.

Standing and watching people passing by in the street while a classic was being screened before a thin audience, I used to wonder: What a pity, they don't realise what they are missing!

**What was the response of the writers and intellectuals? Did they participate in your programmes?**

Interestingly, it was not the so called intellectuals and writers who showed enthusiasm to watch these films, but students from the university, engineering college, medical college, 'ordinary' employees at the bank or government. It was a revelation to me. Among the intellectuals, there was always this tendency to look down upon films.

**After coming back from the institute, were you confident of making a living as a filmmaker?**

Yes, for, I could not have done anything else. At that time, I had several lucrative offers from organizations like UNICEF. But I refused them.

Initially I thought I would try for five years. If nothing happens by then, I will reconsider my decision. Nothing happened after five years. So, then I thought, I would try for another five years. I could make my first film only after seven years.

**Did you ever think of assisting other directors? Were there any offers?**

Never. Assisting another director never occurred to me. As for offers, there were none. We had approached some people for financing, but nothing was working out. Then one of our friends who worked in Kuwait agreed to produce a film. And we ventured into the film *Kamuki*. G. Aravindan was associated in its production. We traveled a lot on his scooter to scout for the locations. I had reworked the script that was originally written by the noted Playwright, C. N. Sreekantan Nair. I even shot for three-four days. But by that time our producer had diverted the money to some other venture, and we didn't know that. He never told us about it. Then he thought that we would get some distributors to invest in it and started showing the rushes around. But it didn't work either. We had cast a new face as heroine, along with established actors like Madhu, P. J. Antony, Adoor Bhasi etc. But nothing came out of it.

**What was its theme?**

It was an ordinary story, very conventional. So I did some repairs on the treatment. I had a bad experience with that. Someone who saw the shooting went and told the author that we were not shooting what he had written. And it created a lot of misunderstanding amongst good friends. I too lost interest in it. Eventually, the project was abandoned.

But I learned a great lesson from it: never start shooting a film unless and until one is sure of the money for completing it. We also had problems arising out of lack of work experience. It was during a rainy season that we decided to shoot. The moment the



camera was set, the rains would start pouring down. It happened again and again, and the sun hardly showed up.

**Which was your first film after you came out of the Institute?**

It was a short film of 50 seconds duration. It was made in 1967 for a competition at Montreal on the theme 'Man and His World'. I was broke and had no money to hire a camera or other equipments. Fortunately at that time, a filmmaker friend from Bombay K. T. John was making a documentary on Swati Tirunal. I helped him in collecting relevant materials and to coordinate production. After his work some film was left, which he gave me. He also had his own camera. My film became possible only because of that. When he went to Bombay to develop his film, I also went with him and processed mine, and edited it there.

Then it was sent to Montreal. Sometime later, I received a telegram informing that the film was selected as one among the best twenty films in the festival, and that it was being preserved at the Cinematheque of Canada. Karamana Janardhanan Nair was the hero in that film.

**What was it about?**

It was about life, desire etc. No dialogues, only a series of extreme close shots. It was a sort of collage.

**Could you elaborate on the early days of Chitralekha?**

Initially we were trying to get some assignments from various government departments and agencies to make documentaries. We had no choice but to accept any offer that came our way. I made documentaries on family planning, lottery etc. It helped Chitralekha to establish itself financially. Whatever money we got, we used to invest in equipments. So we had equipments, but no money.

The biggest project was a documentary on the Idukki Hydel Project. It was an eight-year project covering all phases of dam construction. But we had not enough money to bring Mankada Ravi Varma from Madras to shoot it. So I myself shot it. We completed it in eight years. It was to be released in all the main cinema houses in Kerala the day Mrs. Indira Gandhi was to inaugurate the Idukki project. So M. N. Govindan Nair who was

the electricity minister then, wanted the film to be ready for the occasion. The advance money came forth quickly and Chitralekha made substantial gains from it.

**When was *Swayamvaram* made?**

After coming out of the Film Institute, I had to wait for almost seven years to make my first feature film. Meanwhile I had submitted a script *Kamuki* to the Film Finance Corporation, but they were not willing to finance it. Later, I happened to meet its MD. When I enquired why our application was turned down, he said, 'why do you want to make films on romance and all that? India has become a free country and we have a lot of problems. Why don't you make films constructively?' I told him I couldn't tackle India's construction problems all by myself (later I came to learn that he was also acting as the M D of a cement company!)

Later, under changed circumstances, I submitted the script of *Swayamvaram* and it was accepted. The loan was for one and half lakh rupees. The cost of production of the film was around Rupees two and a half lakhs. Before that we had made a documentary on family planning, a popular one with stars and all that. We also had some money from it. Initially there were problems distributing the film, but later we did it ourselves.

**Were you able to complete *Swayamvaram* according to your plans?**

We shot it in two schedules, because we had problems

*Swayamvaram*





getting the dates of the actress, Sarada. She was working in several films at that time. So we had to arrange the schedule to suit her convenience. But usually I like to complete my films in one schedule. I prefer to do a film at one stretch when my creative energies are at its peak; you need complete concentration while doing a work.

**In *Swayamvaram*, the couple is coming to the city, and the rest of the film unfolds in the city. But after that, city has not been a significant presence in your films.**

There is no city in Kerala; the urban reality is something alien to us. Just electricity and telephone poles don't make a city. You have a semblance of a city in Kochi, but it is within a small radius. It is actually a big town. We don't have a city like Bombay or Calcutta in Kerala. So stories of the city are improbable in Kerala, which is basically semi urban. Neither do we have a typical rural population as it exists elsewhere in the country.

**While most of the films of the Indian new wave went back to the village and dealt with rural violence and caste issues, *Swayamvaram* was a love story set in a town.**

In Kerala, there are no such villages or such feudal situations. All that is in the past. It would be falsifying a reality by hankering after such themes.

While making films I am not concerned about strictly contemporary, day-to-day issues. Any good film has to survive the period of its making. It has to go beyond today to be relevant tomorrow. I am very particular about that. As a result these films also don't age, I hope. They remain contemporary. When *Swayamvaram* was shown in Paris last year, it was the youth who particularly liked it. A film I made more than thirty years ago in Kerala is liked by the youth of Paris today!

Its theme is universal. It is basically about youth, its struggles, aspirations and ambitions, etc. And it is about a real situation, which has a haunting quality about it. **Another interesting thing is that Viswam is an aspiring writer. Hero as a writer or one aspiring to be one is a recurrent theme in your films. It is there in *Katha-purushan* also. In *Mathilukal*, the hero is a writer. And *Anantharam* is about the process of writing.**

**Has it something to do with your own adolescent dream to be known as a writer?**

Probably. Our views are formed in the years of our childhood. Our worldview is also influenced by the way we saw and experienced the world around us. All this goes into our work. *Anantharam* deals with this. The artist is revealing and also rediscovering himself through his work.

**In conceiving *Swayamvaram*, were you influenced by any films or filmmakers?**

In *Swayamvaram*, you may find traces of some influence, like Ghatak, Ray etc. But in later films, it is not there at all. Some have pointed out its resemblance to Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*. In that film also there is love and an elopement to the city. But *Swayamvaram* is more about the trip. And its treatment is entirely different.

**Was it invited to any international film festival?**

Yes, it was in the competition section of the Moscow film festival. It was greatly liked by all and was rumoured to win the prize. But as things turned out, that was not be. Decisions were made elsewhere, not by the jury. I think it was the first film from India that didn't get an award in Moscow. A dubious distinction!

Today things are different. Young filmmakers have great opportunities before them. If a filmmaker's first film is outstanding, he has every encouragement, moral and financial, to make his next. There are several agencies to fund him. World today encourages new talent.

**How was the critical response in Kerala?**

Not much. I think it was more of a question of insensitivity rather than personal enmity. Or, may be, powers-that-be in certain quarters felt threatened.

There was a good write up by T M P Nedungadi. Another one was by Murkoth Kunjappa. It was actually a letter to the editor. It was very encouraging, because it appeared at a time when many people were running the film down. All this gave me great courage to continue. T M P Nedunagadi in his article asked, '*Swayamvaram* over, what next in Malayalam cinema?'

**What about the film societies?**

Film societies were not a strong presence then. It was not yet a movement. I don't think they ever had a



positive attitude to local initiatives. From the beginning they were addicted to films from outside. What is a film society movement for? All this exposure should lead to the making of better films here. Otherwise what is the point? What happened here was the opposite. Always looking outside for inspiration, they only helped in developing a sort of disdain for our own films. We respected only a Bergman or a Fellini, no one from our own midst. What it should have developed is a cultured mind.

When *Swayamvaram* was completed, there was a preview and the noted writer and thinker M. Govindan wrote a cover story in his prestigious magazine 'Sameeksha' and organized a seminar on the film in Madras. A number of intellectuals and writers took part in it. They all welcomed the film without any reservation. I had invited all the film people in Madras. I can't forget P. Bhaskaran coming out and talking in such excitement, he was deeply touched by the film. Balu Mahendra came and hugged me and said, "You

saved us". It was a time when new filmmakers, particularly Film Institute graduates were going through a tough time in Madras and elsewhere.

When it was screened in Thiruvananthapuram, many people came and said that they had the same feeling as watching an 'English movie' (whatever that meant). May be because of the theme and treatment, or because of the careful use of sound and economy of story telling.

#### **How was it received at the theatres?**

I used to get calls from the theatres. They said 'If only you had some songs in it, it would have done well'. But the awards helped us. After the announcement of the national awards we could re-release the film properly. And it ran well. Probably for the first time in the history of FFC, the whole amount of loan was repaid! In those days no one used to repay FFC loans. We were able to repay it because we ourselves did the distribution.

#### **The FFC didn't finance any other project?**

No, after *Swayamvaram* I never approached them.

*Swayamvaram*





**The Indian 'new wave' was in a way financed by the FFC. They produced most of the offbeat films of that period. How come they didn't finance many films in Malayalam?**

Probably not many from Malayalam applied. In contrast, the Bombayites had access. Among other things, the distance too came in between. It was difficult for us to travel all the way to Bombay. So, it was Bombayites who made the most of it. We were lucky to have got it for *Swayamvaram*.

**I think *Swayamvaram* may be the only film by FFC that got its money back through theatre exhibitions. I don't think it has happened anywhere else. Very few of the FFC-funded films were released, and if at all they were released, not many were successful at the box office.**

Yes I think it was an exception. And in spite of all that, that year's Kerala State award committee chose to ignore it completely. The bureaucracy and the vested interests in film industry campaigned against it. P K Nair was the Chairman of the jury. They outnumbered him and even abused him afterwards. This happened at the regional selection committee for the national awards also. The regional committee at Madras didn't recommend the film for the national awards.

Then we sent a lengthy telegram to Ramesh Thapar, who was the Jury Chairman. We heard nothing from him, but evidently he took it seriously and overruled the decision of the regional committee. He also strongly recommended for the dissolution of regional committees. *Swayamvaram* was instrumental to that historic decision.

**Why did you use 'stars' like Madhu and Sarada for the film?**

Actually I wanted fresh faces for both the roles. And I tried in various ways. I wrote to the heads of colleges and universities. But there was not a single response. Later we decided upon Sarada. She readily agreed to do the role. Then we couldn't have cast a novice against her. So we invited Madhu. He was an old friend and right from the time he came back from the NSD he had expressed his wish to act in my film when I made one. By the time I was back from the Institute, he was

already a star. So, he had no hesitation in agreeing to it. Then in order to match the cast of the central characters, we included Thikkurissi etc.

In contrast, *Kodiyettam* was done entirely differently. I didn't use any stars in it. As for the other films, *Elipathayam* featured Karamana Janardhanan Nair, and *Mukhamukham* had Gangadharan Nair as lead actors. None of them were stars.

**As a novice, did you have any problems in directing the 'stars'?**

Many people had asked me at that time, 'will a senior actor like Thikurissi obey you?' But actually I faced no such problem. First of all as professionals they know what is required of them. And then they cannot refuse to do what I instruct them to do. They are acting to me and not to an audience. Moreover, from my experience in theatre I already knew how to deal with actors. I would tell them what to do. If they are not able to follow, I will show them how to do it. Once they are convinced that you know what you are saying, they will follow your instructions.

**Did the star presence help the film to run in the theatres?**

No, it was not the stars that helped it to succeed, but the national awards. It didn't run well initially. But once it got several awards at the national level, people wanted to see it and it ran well. Today it is the other way round. If a film receives a national award, people decide not to see it. That is the change that has come about in the attitude of the Malayalees during the last decades. When *Chemmeen* got the national award, people rushed to see it. *Swayamvaram* was the second film to get a national award. But now things have changed. Now, we take such recognition to mark a film out. It is a depressing trend.

**Looking back, what do you feel about it now?**

*Swayamvaram* is a first film in more than one sense. I think it has something to do with my oeuvre too. *Swayamvaram* was all about choices. The protagonist in it had so many choices before her. It seems, as a beginner, I also had different choices then. I also could have made the obvious choice of going to Bombay or Madras and work as someone's assistant in the industry.



Or, you can choose to stand on your own and fight. It was about an individual who, like me at that time, was facing life without any support from society. I have also grown after that; I have become more rigorous in my work. I have become more refined, I think...

**After *Swayamvaram* bagging several national awards, did any producer approach you?**

No. The only producer who ever asked me to make a film was Ravindranathan Nair. That was after I made *Kodiyettam*.

**In the intervening years between *Swayamvaram* and *Kodiyettam*, what did you do?**

I made several documentaries.

**What made *Kodiyettam* possible?**

Without that money from the documentary on Idukki Project, we couldn't have completed *Kodiyettam*. Actually we had shot the whole film in 1975. We had our own camera and recording instrument, so we could shoot it with little money. Some sequences, for example, the festival scenes, were shot by me, as we had no money to get Ravi Varma down from Madras. Then we sent the negatives to A V M for processing. After that, we didn't go there for another year. We couldn't have shown our faces there without settling the bill. And it was after receiving the money for the film on Idukki Project, that we went there. When we checked the negatives, one whole sequence was missing. It was lost. We had to reshoot it. So we could complete the film only in 1977, though we had it shot two years before.

I also recorded the entire sound for the film on my own mainly out of financial compulsions. These are some of the advantages of being poor. You are forced to learn a lot of practical things, by doing them yourself. The time when we made a lot of documentaries was virtually also a learning period for me. Very often I had to handle the camera, sound equipments etc on my own. This has helped me a lot in my work later. When I wanted a shot to be taken in a particular fashion, I also knew I was not proposing something impossible to the cameraman. It helps one to get what one wants from the technicians. Usually I note down such things in detail at the scripting stage itself.



*Kodiyettam*

**I think *Kodiyettam* stands out from the rest of your films by virtue of its simplicity and lyrical quality. The structure is not complex and the narrative is a straightforward one.**

No other kind of treatment was possible for the film. A more sophisticated approach would have evoked an attitude of condescension, of looking down upon him. Or, if you make him a hero, you will have to look up towards him. Both were not possible. You had to have an eye-level treatment.

Actually its structure is that of a festival in a village temple. I wanted to create an intimate experience of everyday rural life. It is structured in such a way as to look natural, as if there are no outside interventions. During the course of the film, the festival comes full circle, parallel to it is the inner development of the



characters as well. The film starts with the ritual 'katina vedi' (ritual fire works) marking the beginning of the annual festival. A peculiar feature of our region Central Travancore, is the presence of hill-gods. There are no regular idols atop, but each hill is dedicated to a Kaurava, like Duryodhana, Karna etc. My family hill-deity is Karna. The film was shot at a hill near my family house in Adoor that is dedicated to Duryodhana. Till recently the devotees used to offer arrack and cock, something that retained old tribal characteristics. The film begins with the oorali's (representative of the deity, a sort of oracle) arrival, and the announcement of the annual festival, which commences with the procession of the spectacular 'horses'. The film ends with the fireworks, like a festival. Throughout the film, only very innate sounds and images are used. Sankarankutty is presented as part of nature/landscape.

The film is about the process of his individuation; his forays into the world around him. And there is a certain sense of ascendance in his endless journeys first on foot, then on a bullock cart and finally on a truck.

*Kodiyettam*



Physically, his travels take him gradually from the plains to the high ranges. And he is always interested in movement, speed... So, though he may look slow and sluggish, deep within him, he has a yearning for speed.

The idea of the family, which is a mark of identity and individuality, runs through the film. As life progresses, experiences of different kind—deceit, tragedies etc are faced with. Finally he arrives. And the film ends with him giving a 'pudava' (apparel) to his wife (a marriage ritual).

**Is Sankarankutty a remnant of the feudal system like Unni in *Elipathayam*?**

Sankarankutty has no feudal background. His family does not hold land or wealth. He is an ordinary man who is gullible and can be easily manipulated. There is goodness in him that is exploited by all, even by children. And whoever gives him love, suffer tragedies and it pains him.

**How was it received?**

It was received well everywhere. It is the favourite film of many people. Actually different people like different films of mine, not the same one. While some like *Swayamvaram*, others like *Elipathayam* or *Mukhamukham*. There is no one film liked by all.

It was the first film of mine that Ray saw. And while watching the film, he was laughing aloud throughout. He liked the film immensely and during the discussions after the screening, he asked, 'do you want to do away with music and background score altogether?' I said "No". Then he said, 'you should not do away with it. When used sparingly, music can become very powerful'.

**Music is always used very sparingly in your films, isn't it?**

Yes. Most of the viewers didn't feel that *Kodiyettam* didn't have a background score. Only when they are told about it do they realise it.

**The ambience sounds are so rich that one doesn't notice the absence of background score.**

Actually the recording of sounds for the film took longer than the shooting schedule. I traveled all over Central Travancore with a Nagra sound recorder.

After *Kodiyettam* you parted ways with Chitralekha Film Cooperative. Looking back what





*Elipathayam*

**do you think of the Chitralekha experience?**

I learned a good lesson from it. I feel convinced that artists should never get embroiled in institutions. You tend to get drowned in its petty problems. During the 14 year period from 1965 to 1979 when I was with Chitralekha, I could only do two films. I did all the rest during the next 15 years. It may have done a lot of good to the Society, but not to me.

**The Unni of *Elipathayam* is the exact opposite of Sankarankutty. While the latter's is a constant movement into the outer, the other is constantly moving inward, withdrawing. While one plunges into the world and its experiences, the other is intimidated by it. Sankarankutty floats around in the world without exerting a will of his own.**

***Elipathayam* is also your first colour film. Is the use of colour thematically significant?**

I have used the primary colours, green, red and blue for the three sisters. They are all of one family, and so if you mix them all you get colour white. The youngest was given red to signify vitality, freedom and revolt. It is shades of green for the eldest sister, which signifies

earthiness, practicality etc. Rajamma is given blue, for generosity, nobility and doom. Vertical lines suggest unrest. So I gave Unni white shirts with vertical stripes. **The end of the film is enigmatic. It looks almost as if Unni is seeking our sympathy with folded hands.**

Actually it is the typical posture of a rat—wet and shivering. It is a posture common to all rodents. He is not begging for our mercy as many think.

People who threw him in the water wanted him to drown. And the end is a coming out of an experience. You should not succumb to an experience, in which case you won't be able to benefit from the experience. If you succumb to an experience, that is a dead end and nothing comes out of it. It is like capital punishment, where the victim is denied the chance of learning from experience and to change. Till that moment none of the tragedies, of those near and dear to him, has affected him. He was so engrossed in himself. So he needed a sort of physical punishment, a strong jolt, to come out of it. He was a man who refused to take his bath if the water was



below a particular temperature. Now he is thrown into the pond in the dead of the night. That is the crowning experience of his life. That might work. He is rising from the pond with a possibility of change writ all over him.

**In the film most of the representatives of the outside world are aggressive. For example the eldest sister, the man who he meets in the darkness, the woman labourer etc. Is he a character who is trying to avoid the harsh reality of the world with which he can't cope?**

The house is actually an island anchored in the past and he is trying to hold on to its ground in vain as it shakes and shivers in mild to harsh tremours unleashed by the unkind world outside.

But the world outside is not that harsh or cruel to everyone. It does take kindly to Rajamma when she is sick and neglected. They are full of concern and kindness.

**When I saw *Elipathayam* some years back, I felt**

**that Unni was a pathetic character, when I saw it now I felt he was actually cruel, totally insensitive to the pains of others.**

He is scared of everything outside. He is afraid of love, because that means sharing, stepping out of oneself. The film is structured as a constant closing in. The successive movements of the film are from the outside to the inside. In the initial sequences, he is found going out, in the garden etc. Later he is seen on the veranda, and then he moves inside and lastly into the chamber. The world and the people are all outside the frame. They only appear in the end to catch him.

Basically he doesn't want to be bothered. He doesn't want to take the pains of finding a groom for his sister, which he knows will invite trouble about division of property etc. He is a man who is totally engrossed in himself. Throughout the film you see him preening himself; manicuring his fingers, trimming his moustache, oiling his body. He doesn't share his fears, dreams or thoughts with anyone. He is obsessed with

*Elipathayam*





himself. That is why he gets upset when his torchlight breaks. He is not able to contain even that. The past weighs on him. Though he has nothing to lose, he believes that he has much to lose.

When it was screened in Calcutta, Mrinal Sen came and told me “You must have gone through intense trauma to make a film like that”. He was right. I wrote the script of *Elipathayam* when I was going through a very painful period. I had to leave Chitraklekha which I had founded and built up over a long period of my youth. There were a lot of misunderstandings between friends and parting of ways. It was in 1979. I made *Elipathayam* in 1981, the intervening period was a tormenting one in my life. It prompted me to look at myself incisively.

It was also a script that I wrote fast: it took only two weeks to complete the first draft. *Mukhamukham* took the longest period to complete—a couple of years.

***Elipathayam* is also one of the most finely structured of your films.**

Actually the film consists of six departures; first three are rats, and then three human beings. The first departure is that of the youngest daughter. We don't see it, it is only reported. The second is that of his devoted sister, whom the people carry away to safety/death with affection and compassion. As for him, who refuses to change, he is hunted around, caught and forced out. So what each one gets from the outside world is what one has given. It all depends on how you look at the world. If you are afraid of it, they will scare you. If you want to accept it, they will receive you, and so on. There is always something abstract about the ‘world’; it is what we make of it. Unni is someone who has cut himself off from the world. So the world has also forsaken him, which is signified by the shot of a child being pulled away from crossing the entrance to the house. It is only then that he realizes that he is totally alienated from the world. Then there is the ameen from the court who comes to serve a notice on him.

The economic base of that family is also very clear in the film. They have some paddy, coconut trees, pepper etc. If there is a short fall in any of these, the

family won't be able to make two ends meet. So Unni can't afford to divide the property. And the sloth is his legacy.

**The use of music in *Elipathayam* is striking. You usually use music to underline something or to emphasise, like in *Elipathayam*.**

I would say, as a counterpoint or as a leitmotif. M.B. Srinivasan and myself discussed a lot, rehearsed even more and then recorded a theme music for this film. Actually it is a musical piece that can't be hummed. It suggests disintegration, a feeling of constant falling like half finished sentences. Only in the end, when he rises from the pond, is the full score used.

Then there is the musical sub-theme that evokes the mood of a sacrificial ritual. And it is not the normal reproduction of any musical instruments. We recorded it using musical instruments like ‘tambura’ and ‘ghungru’. Then the tape was run at a slower speed to create the eerie effect we wanted. This music is used for the rat drowning sequences.

**Among your protagonists, Unni is one character that doesn't have any redeeming features.**

That is what he is. The film is trying to explore the question, what is being? It is an incisive examination of what constitutes an individual. In close scrutiny, a person is made out of his actions and interactions. It is always a give and take. For Unni, it is always takes and no gives, while for his sister Rajamma it is always giving and no taking. There is no individual sans the society, which is what ultimately gets clear. That is why there is nothing redeeming about him. There is a pathetic/pathological inevitability about his being. But there is also something comical about him.

We are also like Unni on many occasions; many a time we also get stuck in the comforts of a particular situation and wish the world away; any disturbance would upset us. You gradually become pathetically dependant like Unni who can't even think of living without his sister.

**Their relationship borders on the incestuous.**

He is over dependent on her. And she is caught in the bondage of familial duties and relationships. But she also has hopes of getting out of it all, which is evident



from the keen interest she shows in the marriage proposal. It is actually one's relationship with the immediate world around and the nature of its intensity that determine his/her character. Rajamma wants to protest but doesn't. What is suppressed gets expressed as her illness.

**This stomachache continues in *Mukhamukham* also.**

There the context is different and it owes to his way of life. In fact, Sreedharan's stomachache helps shine a torch into his past—a past about which his acquaintances as well as the audience have little knowledge. As a matter of fact, many party workers of that period had stomach problems, for they had a tough life underground—with all those wanderings, and irregular food habits. And many of them resorted to alcohol for alleviation—as a painkiller—it was the only way out for them particularly when they could not 'surface' and get proper medical care.

But it should be noted that the Sreedharan who

comes back is only a possible extension of what we have known about him in the first half.

***Mukhamukham* is a very poignant film about the degeneration of the left. Why do you think the critics and the audience in Kerala did not take kindly to it?**

Even before it was released there were rumours that it was an anti-communist film. When it was released, it was criticized as anti-communist. I think it has something to do with film literacy. We are not able to react to a film naturally. Instead we are aghast that a communist drinks alcohol and we pick on that. That is not the way to approach a work of art.

I think Thoppil Bhasi was the only person who saw it in proper perspective. I was flattered. He said in a public meeting in which the top ranking communist leaders participated that it was a film that prompted the communist to be self-critical. I told in my reply that neither a communist party cardholder, nor an enemy of the communists could make a film like that.

*Mukhamukham*





**In the film, everything revolutionary, and vibrant is in the past. In the present, the communist leader is in a stupor. Everyone is eagerly looking up to him for guidance, inspiration...But he is passive and never reacts, which frustrates everyone. So the past becomes a virtual burden now.**

Why should I make a film to run down or to praise something or someone? I make a film because I feel about it. Maybe they didn't understand the language of the film or its complexity. It is as complex as *Anantharam*. Here it is as if we are wishing someone back to life. Derek Malcolm made an interesting comment about the film. He said that the film was about the failure of the leadership to live upto the expectations of the people. There are a number of scenes in which different people look up to him with great expectations—his son, wife, Sudhakaran, comrades, villagers... The great expectations and its failure constitutes its basic conflict.

**A deep rupture is central to the film. A rupture between ideals and real politick, hopes and reality, past and present, what ought to be and what is, and so on. Actually the character himself is presented as emerging out of public memory, newspaper reports, photographs etc. so, he re-presents an utopia the people imagine or yearn for.**

Communism is one such grand utopia, isn't it? We are almost convinced that it can't be realized in actuality. The fall of Soviet Union and the reforms in China confirm that. Everything, including ideology, has an organic beginning, growth and decay. If one believes otherwise, that is a problem. The film in fact refers to it. There is a quote from Lenin, saying that in the course of progress of the movement, some stagger and stop and are unable to continue the struggle, but the real challenge is to confront changing situations, renew the approach and march ahead.

Evidently in this journey, there are many who drop out tired. They have made their contributions, but can't continue. In the film, Sreedharan has already delivered his message. In fact, the real culprits are the people. He is not the culprit, we are. We want the revolution to be conducted by somebody else. Hence this hope, 'If

only he were here...' We expect somebody else to do our job. He in fact was only a messenger who brought a message and had delivered it. In the second half, significantly, he doesn't say anything, neither denies nor affirms. In fact there is a faint and uncertain appreciation on his face only when the young man (Sudhakaran) revolts.

So, his is a silence that can be interpreted in various ways, differently by different people according to their perceptions. And it is his very presence that confuses the people. He is always sleeping, he is silent and he drinks. They can't take this. Now he has to listen to his own words from the mouth of his disciple, sitting in the new Party office that is built and dedicated to his revolutionary memory... The party, not the movement, has always been comfortable with the martyrs, a living and unaligned hero of the past can be a cause of bother and embarrassment.

**It is true. For martyrs never come back to correct you.**

Not just the party, even the public is like that. We never say ill of the dead. Instead we use superlatives about them.

**His relationship with women is also a bit muted and repressed—his overtures to his future wife and his hesitant, shy liking for the party comrade etc.**

It was actually part of their Party discipline. While living underground, they take shelter in houses of sympathisers, but they have to behave as exemplary gentlemen. The conduct should be such as to win the admiration of the people. So he has to mercilessly suppress his desires and passions, in other words he has to wear a mask... There is always this secrecy about them. We never know their real names. And they should leave no traces. So, we find Sreedharan burning his letters. It may be Party letters in the first half. But in the second half, his wife suspects that it is from some other woman. But it may also indicate the end of a relationship. That letter can be from a woman or from an organization. So the letter also has this dual possibility, like the character whose identity is attributed.

It was not uncommon amongst many communist leaders of that time who spent a long time underground



to have such affairs. The letters I received subsequent to the release of the film and the mild controversies that followed, from various people including old comrades confirmed the truthfulness of the situation presented in the film. They said (many of them didn't want their names to be disclosed) that it was similar to their own experience. While writing the script, I had taken efforts to study their lives as closely as possible. I read many autobiographies and interviewed many involved, because I wanted it to be truthful to history and the movement itself.

In *Elipathayam* we examine all the experiences, even fantasies, of Unni as if under a microscope. We know everything about him, like about an insect. In the case of Sreedharan in *Mukhamukham*, we don't even know his real name. Even after seeing the film, we don't know much about him.

**In the film, he comes from somewhere and also disappears one fine day.**

During the period when the Communist Party was banned, the grass root leaders used to do that. They lived under different names and identities. For example Thoppil Bhasi's play—**Ningalenne Kammunistakki** (you made me a communist)—was published under the pseudonym, Soman. They had different names in different places. The treatment of the film is such that the enigma of the main character is not resolved, but gets even more complex after we see the film.

**In the film, there is a lengthy shot of Kaviyur Ponnamma, just before her version of Sreedharan begins. It is a medium close up of her face. In the beginning she is pleasant, almost beaming, but it gradually transforms into sadness and pain, to finally end in uncontrollable sobs. In such shots I find the influences of art forms like Kathakali, where 'bhava pakarcha' (the gradual transformation of moods) is important.**

The whole story of her relationship with him pass through her face—his transformation from being a hero to being discredited, from a leader to a drunkard.

I think *Mukhamukham* is one film which when I watch it even now, is compact and precise. There is not even a frame in it that I would like to have removed from it.

In the case of some films, there is always this feeling that one could have reduced the length of a particular shot etc. (which I feel is a wrong feeling, for that comes out of watching it the nth time. A fresh viewer may not feel so at all) But in the case of *Mukhamukham* I have never felt it. After seeing the film, Ray said, "I admire your guts to make a film centred around a character who always sleeps".

The characters that recollect the memory of Sreedharan are dramatically placed in concentric circles, one within the other. The tea shop owner is the least related to him while the son is the closest. We start with the farthest—the tea shop owner, and pass through other characters to end up with the son. These are not flashbacks. They are blocks of memories built forward or upward. He is constructed out of memories of people, but they are not flashbacks in the conventional sense. This movement, from the outer to the inner, is also a movement in the intensity of relationships. And it is from the closest relationship, between the father and the son, that he is finally recalled as in sorcery.

**This return could also be a dream dreamt by his wife.**

Yes, actually the whole sequence is within quotes. You find the child sleeping in the foreground while his mother is dozing. She is awake and asleep, conscious and unconscious. You have the same sequence repeated at the end when her father comes and informs that Sreedharan has been killed. So the whole story of the return is a visual quote between these shots. It can be real but it can also be a dream.

**So the film could be about any utopian idea, not necessarily communism?**

Yes. Also that everything, be it an idea or a movement itself, has an organic growth, development; everything has its youth, growth, zenith and decay and downfall. There are no exceptions.

**It is also one film of yours that teems with the presence of people of all kinds, labourers, union activists, villagers, school children.**

Yes. He is in fact the revolutionary spirit of the people. **I think that is evident in the sequence where**



only his associates go inside the factory to hold discussions with the management while he stays outside at the gate as a satyagrahi. So looks like the spirit of the struggle, not part of the real politic.

Yes.

This was made much before the fall of the Soviet Union. So it was prophetic in a sense.

Yes, in 1984. Ironically, it was well received there in the Soviet Union.

There are many aged people in all your films. They seem to be a permanent feature remaining in the background of the protagonists life?

Yes, I have a very special relationship with them. I am particularly sympathetic to old people who have fallen into bad days. I am concerned. Old people carry a whole life's experience all over their face and body. They have a very special character and look. Actors like B. K Nair have acted only in my films. Vembayam has done some small roles in other films also. I have written about them under the caption, 'Two little big actors'. Both

are no more now. When I was a child, we had one old man like Veluchar in *Kathapurushan* at home who was great company for me. He managed the house and looked after the estate.

In *Anantaram*, the presence of the three old men is striking. In a sense the film is about the impossibility of youth. The impossibility of the youth in compre-hending a world that is too old for him. He is in constant awe of their world that looks magical to him, and over which he gradually loses grip.

Such a reading is possible.

No one really knows for sure what causes mental illness, and why it happens or what is its cure. Similarly no one knows why one becomes a writer or artist. The reasons are mysterious. Is it genetic, social, circumstantial, sheer grit or something else? No one really knows. A madman has no method with his materials. When there is a method to madness, it becomes creation.

Maybe a madman is not able to extricate himself

*Anantaram*





from the quagmire of his experience, whereas the artist is able to come out and make creative use of it.

Exactly. Ajayan in *Anantaram* has all the makings of a writer but he is not a writer. The film is about ambivalence, about the nature of reality. What is experienced in a dream ceases to be so when you wake up. Which of it is real? Maybe both. Maybe one negates the other.

And I have always thought that cinema is a medium that is ideal for such probings. Cinema is after all a series of frames and the reality within them. But then there is a reality outside it as well. Which one is real, the one within the frame or outside of it? When the camera changes angles, lenses, or alters positions, the frame also changes. So here the reality is altered, qualified or even negated.

**Because cinema has a dream quality to it as a medium.**

Yes, for the very fact that it eliminates non-essentials; that it concentrates on the impact. And it floats free of any moorings of time and space. All this gives a dream quality to film. After seeing a worthwhile film, it is not the visual details that we carry with us, but its inexplicable impact. The film, in fact is a more organized dream made up by the conscious mind.

***Anantharam* is actually about the multiplicity of selves within us. Ajayan has various talents that seeks expression but are snubbed by the society. He is a lover, a loner, a dreamer, and also an over-smart boy during schooldays.**

There is an introvert and an extrovert in every one of us. We see the extrovert in him in the first part, in the first story. He is over-smart. And he is recounting his life. It is only natural that when one speaks about one's talents, one tends to exaggerate. So it is an exaggerated self that is presented before us.

The film is structured like a monologue. I actually titled the film **Monologue** in English. The sequences of events are arranged in a manner following the logic of a monologue. It is in fact a visual monologue. Ajayan, the main character is a young person in an irrational state of mind. He is trying to find the rationale to his

irrationality. His attempt is to narrate how he became what he is now. There are two versions in the film, each supplementing the other and not contradicting. There can be many more stories though.

The creative process takes place in three stages: one is that of the actual experience of the author. The second is the recalling of this experience, the third its arrangement. How one arranges it would depend on the theme, what one wants to convey. On that basis he picks and chooses those high points of his experience to make up a story in faithful pursuance of the theme. The first story he narrates says that he was too smart and too bright for a society that was mediocre. It always tried to stifle him. So he withdrew into himself. In the second story, he goes further back in time and states that his childhood was confusion striven and it was impossible to tell real from the fake and the imaginary.

Everything is ambivalent about his upbringing. The doctor whom he calls his father is not his real father, but is like a father for him. His brother is not his real brother, but like one. There is a certain duality about his perceptions.

Remember those sequences with the three old men at home. There is an element of magic to these sequences. It is night and it is raining outside. But the old man is thirsty and is drawing water from the well even as he is getting drenched in the torrential pouring. When he gets back to the verandah, there is no trace of rain drops on his person. His clothes are dry and he gulps in the water collected in the vessel that came out of another vessel of the same shape and look.

On another rainy night, a woman walks across the verandah and vanishes into the rain outside. The old men make the child believe it was a 'yakshi' (an enchanting spirit).

The three old men there are essentially contradicting what they are there for. One is a driver but we never find him driving the car. The car is stationed inside the shed and it stays there immobile. The second is a pharmacist in the dispensary who shoos his patient clients away preferring his cozy afternoon nap. The third one is the cook who eats most of what he cooks. And they are always weaving a web of lies around him.





*Anantaram*

He doesn't have anyone else to refer to. So may be he gradually loses the faculty to discern the real from the false.

There is another scene in which the three old men appear before him as apparitions. He wakes up screaming, and when they open the window, it is already noon. They had come to say goodbye to him. The change in lighting changes the whole perception of reality. Similar is the case with the car, which we first find moving, the driver at the steering wheel. We have no reason to suspect how the car moves. But then, with a slight panning of the camera, we are led to see that the car is being towed away by a tractor.

So, as soon as we start making sense of reality, it turns into something else, which is what is happening in Ajayan's case as well. The reality outside the frame is continuously correcting the reality within it.

It has a very complex structure. That film should be seen in theatre, sitting in the dark. Then only will its magic work.

But my experience is that it was not properly appreciated outside India. May be, they do not expect any complex treatments from us. Or rather, they

are not prepared for it. Either it has to be erotic or at least exotic to find a wider audience in the west.

At home, it was popular with people who are literate. The more sophisticated, the better was the appreciation. Many young people liked it too. It has happened in the case of two films of mine. In the case of *Anantaram*, it was the youth who were deeply touched by it. *Mukhamukham* moved people of a certain age. Both invited very intense responses. Many people came and told me of their own lives, many personal problems that they normally would divulge only to a doctor, a

psychiatrist. Both films are of course very genuine and authentic.

**There is a universality that comes out of minute details.**

Many people have told me that my films are about strange persons. I tell them it is not so. They get such an impression because they have never gone close enough to a character. The moment you care to study a character closely, the complexity of the person becomes quite overwhelming. Many people think that Sankarankutty is a mentally retarded person. Far from it. He is just an ordinary person like any one of us. We tend to forget that we ourselves behave like him in many situations.

***Mathilukal* was the first film that was based on a story written by someone else. Why did you choose Basheer?**

It was a time when I was trying to write a script based on one of my own ideas but it did not quite work. Then I thought of *Mathilukal*. I had read the story when it was published first in the Kaumudi annual number in the year 1967, as I can recall. Many people thought of making it into a film but the fact that the





*Mathilukal*

heroine never appears discouraged them. Basheer told me that some filmmakers even thought of six different heroines to play the character. Every time the hero talks to her over the wall, a different actress was to be shown! Ultimately the project was dropped.

I read the story again and still found it stimulating. There was a real challenge in filming it, basically that of creating a character without showing her. Secondly it is about the working of a writer's mind, it is a journey through his mindscape. So it was an opportunity to recreate Basheer the writer and the man proper. I read all his works, and then sat down to write the script. When I met Basheer to acquire the rights etc., he readily agreed and asked at the end, "You will show me the final script, won't you?" I didn't say yes or no; but on the way back I told Dr. M M Basheer (well known literary critic and a friend of the writer) that it would be difficult, and asked him to convey it to Basheer gently. Because every writer has certain favourite things which he wouldn't want to forego; but as far as a film

is concerned, the story is only a starting point. We bring a lot many new things to it and that is how a script is developed.

After completing the film, I was particular that Basheer should be the first to see it. I screened the film at Kozhikode for Basheer. After seeing the film, everyone got up, but Basheer was still sitting. I went near him and he said, "not a dull moment". At the press meeting after the screening, Basheer was the one who answered most of the questions about the film. It was a good experience, associating with a great writer. He wanted me to make films based on some of his other stories also like **Entuppuppakkoranendarnnu** and **Pathummayude Aadu**. But I told him it was difficult to do justice to them, to make a film that is as good as or better than the story.

While on the way to watch the movie, he was eager to know whether the film had retained the same ending as the book. The story ends with the protagonist standing outside the jail gate, a rose in his hand. But the film has a different ending. It ends with a dry twig being thrown up on the other side of the wall. I thought the shot of the dry branch rising and falling against the vast blue sky summed up the spirit of the film. After seeing the film, Basheer liked the way I ended the film.

**Why did you choose *Mathilukal* of all his stories?**

Actually I thought of **Entuppuppakkoranendarnnu**. But when I read the story again, I felt that the kind of innocence Basheer was talking about in that story no longer existed. It also happens to be a great literary work that is difficult to equal in a film version. 'Pranayappani' (love fever) of the heroine as depicted in the novel works like magic on the reader. I can't think of anything that I have read that matches it in its intensity and feel. It is simply the gift of a writer's craft at its best.

I found **Mathilukal**, at least initially quite a challenging subject to make a film on. To have an unseen woman as the heroine of a romantic tale was fine as reading material. But how would one translate it into a visual narrative? And when I delved deeper into it, I could read more complexities into it.



**In *Mathilukal*, one could look at the space that the protagonist is occupying in the film as that, imagined by him, from the way it is cut off from the rest of the world, the way an array of characters present themselves before him.**

I have built up a rationale in the film. He starts writing only when he becomes lonely after everyone of his prisonmates has been released. Earlier in the film, he tries to write also but he is not able to. There is another sequence where he is shown pacing up and down the jail veranda on one afternoon, the inner turmoil writ large on his face. When others are asleep in their open cells, here is Basheer awake and alone slowly drifting into his private world. The background score evokes solitude and the restlessness symptomatic of a writer's mind. I am also subtly suggesting the schizophrenic traits that occasionally surfaced in Basheer's life.

In the film, Basheer treats all the characters, right from the Jail Superintendent to the murder convicts, with equal concern and camaraderie.

Basheer has confided that there really was a woman on the other side of the wall. But she was convicted of murdering her husband with a 'chiravatthadi' (the kitchen utensil used for scraping coconut). These details have been held back in the story, as it would go against the romance that was to be built around the character. **Many critics felt that the jail life depicted in the film was too cozy.**

What is shown in the film is in keeping with what Basheer wrote. He is a free soul whether inside the prison or outside of it. He plants and nurtures roses, crotons and even buds plants in the jail compound. It is the creative mind of a writer that transforms an inhospitable place into a beautiful world.

To start with, he was imprisoned along with other politicians. There are indications in the film itself that the struggle was about to end. Everyone is expecting independence. The British will leave, and these very political prisoners will be the rulers of tomorrow. So the jail administration is not very harsh on them. They actually help them in exchanging letters etc. Moreover, Travancore had never been under direct

British rule. Naturally the Travancore prisons were not very harsh with such prisoners. Basheer was imprisoned for being critical about the Maharaja. He was not imprisoned for theft or murder. And he enjoyed all the liberties of a political prisoner.

**It was also made at a time when 'wall' was a predominant image with the fall of the Berlin wall. How was it received outside India?**

While it was screened at the Rotterdam festival, a woman director wondered how I could get the film through the Indian censors! And more interestingly, she thought that the man-woman relationship depicted in the film was extremely sensuous, and it was in sharp contrast to what the west could produce with all its permissiveness.

**What were the other challenges in translating Basheer into film?**

A major challenge was the lengthy dialogue sequences between Basheer and the unseen woman across the wall. All that you had at your disposal was a bare wall and the hero on this side of it. I had to meticulously work out a mise en scene that would make my audience forget the bareness and be carried along by the wordy exchanges.

When you adapt a story, it is very important that the film maker sifts out of the original and extract a text which is all his own to follow. For instance, in the story there is a sentence: "I have kept watch over death". This single sentence has become a long sequence quite central to the film beginning with the head warder waking up Basheer in the early morning. The convict to be hanged before daybreak had asked for tea. The viewer is made to be with Basheer until the last bell rings for the convict. The whole sequence is built up through little movements, exchanges of looks, dialogues in mono-syllables etc. to get the viewer involved.

**I think the use of KPAC Lalitha's voice for the woman on the other side of the wall to some extent takes the magic out of it, for Malayalees are very familiar with her voice, and will identify it immediately with her image. Don't you think so?** This was a complaint many Malayalees had. But they did not seem to realise that if it was the familiar voice of Lalitha they heard from the other side, it was



Mammootty standing on this side playing Basheer. Don't you find it a little strange? At the time of release of *Mathilukal*, Lalita was seen practically in every film and everyone could immediately identify her voice. But then my film has a life even after its time of release, I believe. The film will be appreciated for whatever it is worth once these prejudices are gone or when the audiences of today pass over.

Not that I did not anticipate this problem. I had made every effort to use a new voice. But I could not find one that was as sensuous and expressive as Lalita's. I had auditioned about sixty people from different parts of Kerala. And then finally I decided that a familiar, yet good voice was better than an unfamiliar bad voice.

#### **How do you decide upon the casting of actors?**

Physiognomy is the most important thing. The question is whether the person looks like the character. But while writing the script I never think about the actors. It is after finishing the script that I look for the right actors to play the roles. If established actors are not suitable I start looking for new faces, maybe from

*Mathilukal*

theatre or through enquiries. If I don't know the actor at all, I would give him/her a small role and see for myself whether that person has the potential to do a major role.

**I have always felt that non-stars have done splendidly in your films when compared to the stars. For example Gopi in *Kodiyettam* and Karamana in *Elipathayam* appear as made for the role. Whereas I don't feel the same about Mammootty in *Mathilukal***

In *Vidheyan* I thought his physique suited the role well. The role needed someone of his physique and appearance. Then I also changed his appearance thoroughly to suit the villain's role. But as distinct from the story, I gave him some redeeming features in the film. There was no element of remorse in the story. He is like a serial killer in it—killing, raping and running amuck. In the film he actually kills only one person—that is his wife. With this murder there is a change in his character—he has doubts. Actually I redefined the character to make him more credible,





so that the viewers are able to relate to him. And there is a total reversal of roles in the film.

In the beginning we find Thommi squatting in front of the toddy shop; in the end, we find Patelar in the same position near the waterfalls. He is squatting meekly watching over the rice boiling in the pot while Thommi is bathing in the river naked and in pure abandon. He has grown dependent on Thommi. He has found a comrade in him and manages with him a certain degree of exchange as well. Patelar is also a victim here.

It is Thommi who makes him possible, for you need a slave to create a master. So you needed an imposing figure in the role of Patelar. And Mammootty perfectly suited it. Body and appearance are very important—physiognomy in general. Here the propensity to violence is also a major factor.

It was the case with *Mathilukal* also. My effort was to cast someone who suits the self image of Basheer during that period of his life. In his writings, Basheer always talks about his appearance as handsome, well built and strong. But the popular image we have of him is that of an old man. In the film, he is in his youth, so I thought Mammootty suited it eminently. I couldn't be happy with a lesser actor in that role. It was my intention to capture the image Basheer had of himself.

When he saw the film, Basheer joked to his wife, "Mammootty is not as handsome as I was but he approximates!"

And the two characters Mammootty did in *Mathilukal* and *Vidheyan* are opposites. While one is a self reflective, creative person, the other is a ruffian, devoid of any sense of sophistication or finer feelings.

Your next film, *Vidheyan*, was also based on a literary work, this time by Paul Zachariah. What prompted you to choose it?

One advantage in working with others' stories is that we get an opportunity to respond to approaches and worldviews that are entirely different from ours.

I had read this story when it appeared in a magazine nearly a decade ago. There was something very attractive about it, but it was also very raw and violent. I talked to K. G. George about it as he was on the look

out for a good story and he had already done films like *Irakal*. Though George took interest initially, things didn't work out. About a couple of years later when I found that George's interest had waned, I went back to it again and found it still interesting in many respects, the violence had to be tamed and brought under reasonable control, this was the first task.

Then I wrote the script connecting loose ends and finding reason and justification for actions, tracing characters to their origins etc. What emerged was my own text of the author's writing. It had toed the same line as the author's in most part but had per se deviated from it too as my perceptions of it were not the same as the original. I believe the author also liked my version initially but then he changed his stand for reasons known only to him...

**How did you historicize it?**

*Vidheyan*





I was basically dealing with the phenomenon of power, its psychology and structure, in this film. To make it valid and authentic, I had to examine it in a historical context. Thus the treatment started growing beyond the mere story line. I brought in historical references. The system of 'Patelars' had existed from the British period. They were like local chieftains who were responsible to collect taxes. But along with it came other auxiliary powers—judicial and social, which they abrogated. That is how Patelars became authorities. Interestingly, this system continued even after Independence, until up to the sixties when regular revenue officials took over. All the same, by sheer force of convention the head of a Patelar family enjoyed respect and evoked fear in their village fiefdoms. Not all, but some abused these powers to a great extent.

#### **How is the dynamics of power dealt with in the film?**

The exercise of power anticipates two sides, that of the one who wields it and the one who is subjected to it. Here Patelar assumes that he has the power. The taker on whom it is exercised is the settler Thommi who thinks he has something to lose in resisting the violence. Coming to think of it, he, in fact has nothing to lose. One thinks he has some powers to exercise, the other submits in fear of losing. The film begins with the encounter of these two forces. A degenerate Patelar seated in front of a toddy shop and a submissive Thommi who stumbles into his net. This is how the power play begins.

To exercise absolute power one also needs the subservient. In the film, Thommi never says 'no' to the abuse of power that is unleashed on him. He simply submits and accepts it as something natural. He fears it, and accommodates it alternately. As a settler he has no roots or rights there. He is totally alienated—whether it is the unfamiliar language spoken or in the lack of a sense of belonging there. The soil under his feet is not his, he is an outsider there, he is at the mercy of the one who wields and exercises power.

**Sexual abuse and domination is another mechanism of power operation. That forms a sub theme to the film.**

It is interesting to observe how the power of domination is resisted and detested in silence without any of it being articulated. Then it is slowly accepted and one learns to live with it. Before long it is absorbed as a fact of life. It becomes pathetic when one finds it difficult to carry on without it. In the film, Thommi goes through all these. He could have pushed Patelar into that well and walked off free of the burden. But he can't bring himself to do it. He is worried how he would live without Patelar. He asks, "Who would be there for me then?"

Another revealing situation is when he tries to console his wife who starts sobbing inconsolably at the prospect of his leaving her to accompany Patelar in his run from the law. Thommi tries to cheer her up, "Don't cry. I am there for the Patelar". She is actually crying for him but he doesn't want to admit it before his master, an instance of total negation of oneself.

#### **To pick on the theme of the incomplete family in your films, in *Vidheyan* also both the families are incomplete in many ways.**

Actually Patelar had loved his wife but probably he himself did not know it, and it is after he kills her that he begins to doubt himself. He had no doubts till then. He firmly believed that he had a natural right over others' lives, including his wife's. And with her murder, there is a change in him, for she was someone who really loved him and wished him good. That loss makes him a criminal and he feels guilty and finally succumbs to it. In the case of Omana, though she loves Thommi, circumstances force her to submit to Patelar sexually. **Actually she is an offering from Thommi, after he has offered himself to Patelar totally.**

Yes, his is a total surrender and a negation of his very self. So both the marital relationships are complex.

**While Thommi denies himself totally and is 'self-less', for Patelar there is nothing else in the world but himself. So in a way, they are two poles. In the end there is a move towards self awareness. Patelar finds that he is also an ordinary mortal.**

There is a change in him owing to his guilt and sense of defeat. Divested of all the powers that he thought





*Videlyan*

he had, he is in the end dispossessed. From the moment they enter the forest, they turn into two ordinary human beings. All social connections and disparities severed, we find them eating from the same food packet.

It is this betrayal of social conventions that Patelar meets with at his nephew's house, where the latter refuses to give him refuge. Thommi is contemptuous of the nephew who does not even allow Patelar inside the house. It is only then that Patelar realises the deep trouble he is in, and the fact that he is a fugitive from the law. All relationships are broken there.

**The depiction of violence in the film is very interesting. Usually violence in films is depicted in such a way that the viewer also becomes part of the act. In the film, the focus is more upon evoking disgust about violence. There is an effort to look at violence from the point of the view of the prey.**

Yes. There is this meaninglessness about it.

The oppressor has no idea or he does not care about the feeling of pain. He doesn't know what it is to be on the other side, and the film is about that. It is trying to examine what would happen when the roles are reversed. Here it should be noted that Thommi is not a participant, he is only a witness to all the cruel deeds of the Patelar.

**He doesn't appear to be an agent at any point of time. He only follows.**

There is also this element of goodness in him. That is why he is not able to bring himself to kill Patelar even when he gets the opportunity. He considers him as his benefactor and is grateful to him.

**In many ways Sankarankutty (*Kodiyettam*) is similar to Thommi. Both of them are manipulated and used by others. Maybe it is the social situation of Sankarankutty that could be characterised as pre-modern or idyllic that makes his innocence charming. In the case of Thommi, he is a**





*Videlyan*

**dependent in many ways.**

Sankarankutty is different, he is much more free. He doesn't let people use him. For the politician who recruits him for the procession, he may just be another number in a crowd. All the same, Sankarankutty owes no allegiance to him. *Kodiyettam* is about Sankarankutty gaining individuality, whereas Thommi is alienated, helpless and totally dependent.

**Thommi would find another Patelar, even after he loses this one?**

The possibility can't be ruled out. Yes, even the freedom he gains at the end maybe for the time being. For someone who knows Thommi, his final run may not be one of liberation. He is not running out of joy. There is also an element of sadness in it. His cry also resembles a wail. There is a relief of the burden and also sadness in him. He also realises in an elemental way about the misuse of power, which is evident in

the act of throwing away the gun into the river. We can call Sankarankutty child-like or innocent. But Thommi is not like that. He is terribly attached to his possessions, whether it is his wife or the land. Maybe it is this attachment that leads him to slavery.

**Finally, when he is running away after the end of the Patelar chapter in his life, is there a sort of self understanding in him?**

Maybe, that was just a bad patch, a cloud from under which he comes out. Maybe that marks the end of his miseries. But he may also end up with another master. What we see is that power and its exercise is contextual, it waxes and wanes, appears and disappears according to contexts.

**Or, it is not vested in the individuals**

Exactly. Patelar is powerful only with his cronies around him. When he is alone he is much more contemplative and talks about his plans and confesses. In the company



of his cronies we see him engage in more and more vicious exercise of power. And, in that foiled plot to kill Patelar, it is these cronies who flee first upon hearing the gunshots.

**Rural violence was a common theme of many 'new wave' films. But all those films had to end up with a sign of resistance. *Vidheyan* on the other hand, doesn't bother to do so, and is instead an analysis of violence or power itself. It doesn't take the easy way out by culminating in a clenched fist.**

It is not just the portrayal of a particular incident. It tries to get into the core of that experience.

It is not a coincidence that *Vidheyan* was much appreciated in two countries—Japan and Germany. And I think it owes to the historical experiences of those nations. One critic even wrote that the character of Patelar resembled Hitler.

**Coming to *Kathapurushan*, it also deals with childhood like *Anantaram*. But structurally it follows a chronological order, with a series of historical events that also mark the life of Kunjunni. The film follows the life of Kunjunni at several historical junctures. All films are autobiographical in a way, yet to what extent is *Kathapurushan* autobiographical?**

There are no definite parallels, though there are many resemblances. The film was shot in the house (built by my grandfather) where I was born and had spent most of my childhood. Kunjunni's father was like my father, not entirely though. In the film he appears only once, but my father and mother were periodically separated. I am not the only son like Kunjunni. We also had an old man as house manager very much like Veluchhar. But he had a family of his own. He loved me very much and I was also very attached to him. I was never a member of any political party or an activist.

At home I was not alone. I was the sixth among seven children. In that house I lived with my mother (There was no grandmother as in the film) and my brothers. Those parts dealing with the childhood are very much built out of my own childhood memories and experiences. And memory is always selective.

It doesn't reproduce all that happened in exact conformity. It picks and chooses.

For example I remember one blind old man, his name not known we used to call him 'Uvvera' (a usage repeated in his songs) who used to come home during my childhood. When he came it was great fun. He would tell stories, enact them etc. But years later when I enquired with my brothers and sisters about him, only my elder brother remembered him. So memory is an interesting phenomenon. In memory, only 'we' are there. Only those events and people who affected us directly and deeply are retained. It is also a question of our being sensitive to certain things.

**In the film, most of 'history' or what is happening outside is in fact coming into his space in various ways, as newspaper reports, processions, rumours etc. Any autobiography is also only a possibility. There is the individual's life and also history. In those terms, is *Kathapurushan* an autobiography of your attitudes or orientations to historical events of your time?**

Yes. There is one thing that is common to our lives. The 40 odd years that Kunjunni witnesses are also the ones I passed through in my life. So it is an emotional journey through personal experience, and through recent history. Various landmark events during the last four decades like the Independence, assassination of Gandhi, Communist Rule, land reforms, emergency, the Naxalite movement etc, till the 80's when Nayanar comes to power in Kerala, is there in the film. Actually it is not narrated through flashbacks that look back upon history, but it is depicted as happening in the continuous present. The viewer is not taken into the midst of the happenings but is made to experience their impact on the lives of the people involved.

**The assassination of Gandhiji is a major event in the film. Was it so in your life?**

Yes. I wept for a whole day upon hearing that news. I had great respect and admiration for the man about whom I had heard from my parents and elders. So it was a tragedy of unimaginable proportions.

**As the film progresses, there is a gradual shrinking of space that Kunjunni inhabits, from the vast**



**expanses of the paddy fields and the taravad, he descends to a small house and a little piece of land in the end.**

He finds his own little space. There he also overcomes his inhibition, his stammering, maybe temporarily. But even that is a significant development in living.

**Has this lack, this shortcoming something to do with his self-expression/creativity?**

There is some sort of a vague incompleteness in him from the very beginning. There is a longing for absences, like his father. As he grows up he understands that he was part of a feudal past that survived on the sweat of others. At the same time, he is open. There is this maternal uncle of his who goes abroad to study and becomes a follower of Gandhi, later an extremist and in the end moving to the other extreme, that of spiritual-ity. So there is such a strain in that family. And it is through his own experiences, his brush with reality and ideals, that he attains his commitment in life. He has to make his own discoveries from all these. From the beginning he is open and is never stubborn. He looks forward to goodness in society and fights for it his own way and in the process evolves as a person of integrity and confidence.

**Kunjunni in fact welcomes the land reforms despite personal loss.**

Yes. His mind is a highly impressionable one, hence his efforts to become a writer etc. Initially he wrote romantic pieces, something his comrade friend teases him about. But when he begins to move towards reality, his work is unwelcome to his comrades, it embarrasses them and it gets duly banned. He has come past the romantic period in his life and work.

I thought that narrating the personal experience of an individual was as important as narrating grand events like the world wars. It is particularly so when there is a certain universality to it.

When movements motivated by even the most idealistic approaches become victorious they tend to become establishments, and spend most of its energies to retain and maintain the status quo. And it creates intolerance. Even a little doubt is not tolerated. Hence we need to fight the demons all along. That is what the

storyteller's tale is about. The defeated prince who takes refuge in the forest fights the demon knowing fully well that he may lose the battle. But even then he is not ready to compromise.

It is a universal story about the indomitable human spirit of resistance against evil even at the face of certain defeat. That is why the Prince asks the demon "How can you be so sure that you will always win?" The demon represents the establishment that gets encrusted from time to time.

**How come all your films are centred on men? None of your films have a woman as the central character.**

There are strong female presences like that of the grandmother in *Kathapurushan*.

**Their presence always a benign, loving one—as mother, lover etc. exuding support and warmth. These characters do not have any conflict within them, or their inner conflicts are never a major narrative concern in your films.**

What often happens is that the film germinates as the story of a man. And in our society, women in fact do not have an equal position. What we are trying to make ourselves believe is the opposite, which is not fair. You take a film event or a serious discussion on a subject of public concern. Where are all the women? Why are they all sitting in front of television watching those sob stories? I am specifically talking about the women in Kerala, where the level of female literacy is the highest in the country. I think the self-image of women in our society is weak, and everything—the serials and the films perpetrates that further. In our society they can't even walk freely on the road after sun-set. So what kind of freedom are we talking about? It will be false to portray a fighting woman in our condition now. There may be exceptions though in the urban context. Maybe in the future, I may make a film with a woman at the centre. But is that a solution?

**A film that starts from the point where *Swayamvaram* ends...**

Yes. *Swayamvaram* ends with a heroine of the future. Actually in the film, she is stronger than Viswam, her man. Even in *Kodiyettam*, Sankarankutty's mother-in-



law as a single parent and his wife Santhamma are characters who are stronger willed than him.

**There is this deep fault lines that run through the families in your films, has it something to do with your own childhood or perceptions about family?**

May be. The relationship between my father and mother was a strained one. Most of their life they lived separately. This must have left some scars in my psyche. For my friends had normal families. Secondly, one is not dealing with normal people in films. It is only when there is something out of the ordinary that it becomes dramatically potential.

In *Mukhamukham*, the failure of the father to live up to his son is more painful. It is the son who eagerly awaits his arrival. And his father is coming after almost a decade. But his father's return disappoints him. For, a father is always a hero to his child, even if he is an ordinary person. So, his failure is all the more heart rending. This prompts him to disown his father, at least in secrecy. In the school sequence, where his schoolmates are making fun of his father, he is ashamed and hides himself behind a tree. He is passive and does not venture to come forward and defend his father.

**It is also a metaphor for the failure of the left movement, its failure to live upto people's expectations.**

In the case of his son, it is even pre-ideological, for his expectations are not of the ideologically motivated, but of a period of hopes that goes beyond that.

**Similar is the case with man-woman relationship and love in your films. It is something rare, always in the past and adolescence, something to be tenderly remembered, but rarely lived.**

A closely knit, loving and caring nuclear family is there only in *Kathapurushan*. Even that is arrived at only at the end. Love is also a strong presence in it. Secondly in most of the films, my protagonist is middle aged. He is not an adolescent or a youth. In *Kodiyettam*, when Sankarankutty marries, he is referred to as already past his marriageable age. In *Mathilukal* the protagonist is in his forties. So are Unni in *Elipathayam* and Sreedharan in *Mukhamukham*. Only in *Kathapurushan* and *Anantaram* is the protagonist a youth and in both



*Kathapurushan*

the films, man-woman relationship is very much warm and cordial.

My films are more about the relationship between the individual and the society than about love and family relationships. They are valid as social documents, I think. They should serve as faithful documents of the history of a particular period, the time in which it is set. Hence I always make sure of the authenticity of the facts and materials I use. When I did *Mathilukal*, archival information about the period was difficult to get—I was able to find a Jail Administration Manual of the period, which I studied carefully to recreate the right ambience in the jail sequences.

**How do you rate Indian films in the contemporary international film scene? Have we been able to carve a niche for ourselves like Iran or Korea? If not, why?**



Basically India as a country does not interest other countries. There is no curiosity about India or Indian art. People hear only about disasters here. Even a country like Malaysia is better placed. Moreover, there is no promotion of any kind. For a country that produces such a huge number of films, shamefully there is no concerted effort to promote our better kind of products internationally. Very small countries like Iran which produce not even a small fraction of what we do, promote their cinema aggressively. They have the full machinery in operation—publications, retrospectives, promotional campaigns, festival focuses—what have you. We are a country that doesn't take pride in our culture or arts. The politicians even think that they would get more mileage by going along those crass commercial enterprises. That is the bane of our great nation.

If at all there is any reference about Indian cinema, it is invariably about commercial Hindi cinema, which unfortunately is taken for the Indian cinema. The case of regional films—which are marginalized within the country—is much worse. Sometime back they even decided to shove away those award winners in regional languages from the national network of Doordarshan as they did not garner as much advertisements as those Hindi commercial films did.

**You have made a number of documentaries, many of which have received awards and acclaim. What does documentaries mean to you?**

Most of my documentaries are about performing arts (Kathakali, Koodiyattam, Yakshagana, Krishnanattam). And I have thoroughly enjoyed doing them. They provided a great opportunity to learn about such arts. It is an enriching experience.

Some time back I did a film with my friend Viswanathan, who is a painter, about the river Ganges. Shooting it, we travelled from Gangasagar where the river joins the sea to the Himalayan heights from where it takes its source. I myself shot the film and also scored its sound track. It was a great experience. Nothing was pre-planned, so we had to shoot as we travelled. It was shot in 1985, but still the experience of the travel remains fresh. The film went on to win several major

international awards and it became a precursor to several films on the Ganges.

**It is interesting and indeed intriguing that you have never worked in the video format or for television. Even Satyajit Ray has made television productions. Why is it so?**

Basically I am not into television. I give my films to television channels only for the monetary returns it brings in. Moreover, there is no other way to reach the non-malayalee audience. Through TV it becomes possible to take my films to them at least in the video format.

The TV audience is not a serious one. Basically it is a casual and lazy, drawing room audience whose expectations are different from that of a film audience inside a darkened auditorium. I think the people who come to watch my movies have already taken some pains—to decide on it, travel, buy tickets etc. In my works I give them a lot of respect, and I also expect it to be reciprocated.

I also don't fancy working for television during the intervals between films. Even when I am not doing films, I am thinking of it, worrying about it. Some corners of my mind are always at work, I believe. Instead of spending time cooking up stories, I find making documentaries much more exciting and rewarding. It is always an exercise of replenishment, as it opens new areas of knowledge and experience before me. For instance, when I do a documentary on *Kootiyattom*, I do a lot of research on the art form. And that gives me new insights.

Also, at least for quite some time now I make documentaries only on subjects that interest me deeply, not always for the financial returns.

**Which filmmakers influenced you the most?**

As a student of cinema, all filmmakers, good and bad have influenced me. There is no single filmmaker that I like the most, for there are good films and bad films made by the same filmmaker. For example I like Tarkovsky, his films like *'Stalker'* and *'Andrej Rublyov'* but I did not like his *'Sacrifice'*. I didn't enjoy it. Likewise, though I like filmmakers like Bergman and Kieslowsky, there are also some films of theirs that I did not enjoy





*Kathapurushan*

much. Basically as a filmmaker, what one is trying to do is to show and say things in one's own way. But one has to be necessarily aware of what is happening in one's medium.

And it is not what we learned that we create. We should also learn to forget what we learned. Maybe what we learned would enrich the vocabulary but it can also be restrictive. What one says has to be necessarily in a language and idiom that is home grown. I prefer the European and Japanese films to the American.

**How does a film take shape? What sparks it off—an image, an incident, a character or a situation?** It could be anything. Sometimes a character, an incident, a newspaper report, but it is only a starting point.

For example *Anantaram* is based on a real life story I happened to learn about—about a doctor who adopted a child from the hospital. A friend told me about it. The story developed from this little information. It touches some chords inside you and then it grows from this spark. I started thinking about the child, about what would happen to him when he grows up etc.

In the case of *Kodiyettam*, it started from a person in my village whom I knew from childhood. He is not as

innocent as Sankarankutty, but there are certain similarities. In those days it was not uncommon to see many villagers like him, lazy, innocent and pure. Someone observed after watching *Kathapurushan* that everyone in the film cries at one time or the other. It is true. In those days people were capable of such natural outbursts like laughing and crying. My village some fifty years ago was like that. They were unspoilt and courteous to the core. So when tragedy strikes they cry out making no effort to hide anything. No matter if an outsider is present or not. Now we are not able to comprehend that. We have learned as part of our so called sophistication that we should not show to the outside world whatever is happening to us inside. This is something we imbibed from the modern civilization, I think.

*Elipathayam* started from a simple thought. Why is it that we do not react naturally to things around us? Because it causes inconveniences however minor or inconsequential that be. We rather try to wish inconvenient situations away. Take the familiar experience of eating out. Though we see people starving outside, we tend to forget that. This is a common experience. And we take the easiest way out—try to ignore the existence of it. *Elipathayam* is about it. It is an examination of the question why we don't react to what is happening around us, why we choose to wish them away. Actually it is not because we are cruel or unconcerned but we think we simply can't afford to take cognizance of it.

**What is the process of writing a script?**

After having finalized the theme, subject and a story, I go about writing a treatment. The treatment would outline the various incidents through which the plot progresses to the point of resolution. If that is satisfactory, I begin writing the script in a detailed manner. By the time of shooting, when the location etc are fixed, I prepare a detailed shooting script, with all the details about shots, lenses to be used etc. But at the shooting location, I am still open to improvisations. You can improvise on it only if you have done your groundwork thoroughly. In my experience, what you finally shoot is invariably superior to what you had written earlier. It doesn't even



end there, for you may not follow the same order while editing the film. There again you may have opportunities to make new associations. For example in *Elipathayam*, there is a scene in which the rat is drowned in the pond. After that, the algae over the water close in, the ripples subside, and the surface becomes calm again. What we see is a reflective surface. This shot is cut to the mirror into which Unni is peering. Such connections may occur to us at the editing table while we try different juxtapositions.

Similarly there is this motif of counting throughout *Anantaram*. In the beginning we have a counting when Ajayan outwits everyone in staying under water. Then there is the instrument measuring blood pressure. In the end we again have it, the boy running up and down the steps counting odd and even numbers. It is all about perceptions and the infinite possibilities it opens up.

#### **Do you improvise at the location?**

When you go to the location, there are various factors like the time of the day, the lighting pattern, the trees, buildings etc. which may suggest changes in your shooting plan. You can never be rigid in these matters. Rigidity would mean a certain lack of life. But normally what remains practically unaltered is the dialogue. Usually it remains so till the end.

#### **What do you do inbetween films? If there were finance, would you have done more films?**

It is not the question of finance being available. May be such a situation was there in the beginning. Not nowadays.

Actually I don't get enough time to do my work. I have diverse interests. I like to read, write, travel around. Attend to social duties. There are a lot of things to do. One can't live from film to film. A film takes a long time—from the germination of the idea to its realization. And I can't think of another film before I forget the one I am involved in. By the time a film is finished, it is as if I have grown older by ten years.

And my job doesn't end with the making of the film. I have a lot to do afterwards, its promotion, marketing, distribution etc. For two to three years after a film, one is constantly busy screening it around; you are called



*Kathapurushan*

upon to talk about it etc. So, it takes quiet some time to get the film out of your system.

Then my garden keeps me busy. And above all I like to just sit back and watch the birds and insects and the animals and also the humans apart from those drifting clouds and the plants in rain and in sun shine. And during the intervening period, I don't like to behave like a busy filmmaker. I like to go about like anyone else. Strangely, the general perception about a filmmaker when he is not doing a film is that he is idling and doing nothing.

**Maybe that is the case with directors in the film industry, where they make films for the producers and don't have to bother about it afterwards.**

Yes. They work in factory style. Once you know the technique, you can churn out any number of films. Even while they are shooting somebody else is editing their films. Because everything is predictable—the story, the editing pattern. It is a job anyone can do. It doesn't demand your personal presence.

But in my style of work, I make myself do practically



everything about my film and it is exhausting. I am involved with apparently external concerns like poster designing and publicity. Then you have to handle the correspondence. None else can do it for you. This is also why my producers have never lost money. Not a single film of mine has failed to bring back the investment, with some marginal gains.

**I think it is also the reason why so many filmmakers are not able make it. For, they often lack such stamina and are disheartened by casual criticism.**

Yes. The success of the film depends on so many factors. Quality alone can't carry it through. You have to time the theatrical release of your film well and also get good support from the distribution and exhibition networks.

Nowadays there is such a resistance to good cinema that I am surprised that youngsters still manage to make their first films. The media is neither inclined nor supportive, and a decent release is also out of the question. Whatever meager support it had earlier, is dwindling now. The blame has to be shared by the

*Kathapurushan*



filmmakers as well. In the seventies, when film was cheap, many were emboldened to make films. Most of them were not worthwhile. Many simply lacked in technic and even content. And some of the critics who wrote about these films, when they went on to make films produced atrocious results. They made even greater compromises than the professionals who at least had their excuses. All this has contributed to the downward trend.

**There has been a virtual revolution in the field of imaging technology. The very integrity of the image is under siege. Satellite television and imaging techniques have changed our visual experience in a radical manner. Under these circumstances, do you think cinema has become outdated?**

Cinema itself was born into the midst of a technological revolution. As a medium of the modern age, it has been responding to the changes and itself has been undergoing transformations more frequently than any other art form.

During the last one hundred years, we have seen cinema changing its form and feel so rapidly as even

the ardent followers have found it difficult to cope with. From silence to sound, Black and white to colour, it kept growing at a fast pace. Then came the television. To counter that, cinema developed wide screen, 70 mm, vistarama and so on. Meanwhile sound recording became more and more exacting. Cinema then made use of such technological possibilities to embellish and enrich the use of sound, and you had stereophonic and surround sound etc. At the moment film as a medium is itself on the verge of great changes. Until the early 60's film was shot using two cameras, one to record visuals and the other sound. Later the optical sound recorder was replaced by magnetic



tape recorders. Now the sound recording equipments have become more sophisticated and lighter and they can reproduce sounds with greater fidelity and accuracy. What was happening in audio was also having its effect upon video. With the digitalisation of sound, image also became digital. Now the possibilities of converting video images into film images are being explored and perfected. Such a breakthrough is a blessing in a way; it frees you from cumbersome processes and saves a lot of time and anxiety. But there is also the problem of a technology that is becoming commonplace being used in a careless manner. The casual and careless use of video images is an instance of this sort.

**I think digital imaging, the possibilities of special effects, graphics etc, in a way, liberates the filmmaker by allowing him to recreate dream like images. Liberated from the shackles of reality and its recording, filmmaking for the first time would be able to create virtual dreams.**

This fascination with special effects was always there in the history of cinema. Even in the initial period, George Melies made films like *'Trip to the Moon'* that used a lot of optical effects to produce fantastic images. Special effects are nothing new to cinema.

**As a filmmaker, do these changes in technology and its effect upon the media and audience pose challenges before you? Do you find them threatening or liberating?**

Both. There may be films made available online through the internet, which people can download into their PCs. Even when there are such technological developments, ultimately, how many can afford to make use of them? A film theatre is entirely different. It is like going to the temple to pray even when you have God's images at home. It is like saying everything has its place. Everything has a place where it really belongs and cinema cannot be transplanted to the living room, the ambience there is different from a regular cinema hall.

But technology can bring the cost of production down, make things faster and take away a lot of uncertainties. It is in a way liberating. But it also

creates its own problems. When you do things at such pace, you may not have enough time to think. You are called upon to act so quickly that you don't have the leisure to ruminate over it. The normal editing time of a film for me is three to four months. This allows the chance to grow and change in the process. There is enough time for the film to work on me. This is not available in the case of a film that I have to finish editing in a week. On the other hand, if I want to do things fast while my energies are high, a fast technology should be helpful.

**Apart from production, another major area that has experienced revolutionary changes is that of distribution. With the advent and spread of satellite television, images and narratives travel faster and to all corners of the earth. And it has not been a two way process. This flooding of images and narratives also influence the tastes and expectations of the viewers. Does it affect a serious filmmaker like you?**

First of all, it lowers the expectations of the viewers. That is the biggest problem. I would like to see it as a transitional problem. Only in our country do people watch television in this manner. In advanced countries where television has been there for long, only certain sections of people, like the aged, or children etc—watch it all the time. In our country, maybe because it is a new experience, all people watch it, and sometimes all the time. I am sure that they will outgrow it and come out of the bonsai experience of life that Television provides. While Television is smaller than life, movies are always larger than life. TV viewing has definitely affected the tastes of the viewers. For, television serials thrive on high drama; they have to produce tear-jerking scenes every eighteen minutes or so. But such melodrama is alien to life. In cinema, this happens over a period of one and a half hours. Even when films are shown on TV it is broken up into bits and pieces. You have ads in between. So, as an experience it doesn't compare with cinema. TV should in fact pep up one's appetite for cinema.

Television has also affected the composition of the film audience. Nowadays only certain sections of



people go to the theatre to watch movies; family audiences are gradually withdrawing. This is quite a bad turn affecting the quality of films. And in keeping with the quality of the audience, Cinema has become a dingy place.

**This changed nature of audience and their ever changing tastes, does it affect you as a filmmaker?**

The filmmaker can make films only by placing himself as the audience. You can't make films for an imaginary audience whose tastes you do not know. Neither is it possible to make films for different sections of audience having different tastes. We don't have all the answers, nor do we know their preferences. So you can only make films that you enjoy making and watching.

### Filmography

**Swayamvaram** (One's Own Choice) 123 Mins/B&W/1972 National Awards for Best film, Best direction, Best photography and Best actress. Kerala State Awards for Best film, Best Photography, Best art direction and Best music. Certificate of Merit, International film review, Colombo. Festivals: Moscow, Nantes, Colombo, Pesaro, Fribourg, La Rochelle, London, Paris, New York, Melbourne etc.

**Kodiyettam** (The Ascent) 128 Mins/B&W/1977

National Awards for best regional film and best actor. Kerala State Awards for best film, best direction, best script, best art direction and Best actor. Festivals: Berlin, La Rochelle, Adelaide, Tunis, Valladolid, Munich, Pesaro, Fribourg, New York etc.

**Elippathayam** (Rat-Trap) 121 Mins/Col/1981

British Film Institute Award for the most original and imaginative film shown at the National Film Theatre, London (1982). National Awards for best regional film and Best audiography. Kerala State Awards for best film, best Photography and best audiography. Festivals: Cannes, London, Chicago, New York, Sao Paulo, La Rochelle, Nantes, Hawaii, Sydney, Melbourne, Durban, Pesaro, Fribourg, Helsinki, Paris etc.

**Mukhamukham** (Face to Face) 107 Mins/Col/1984

FIPRESCI Prize, New Delhi (1984)

National Awards for best direction, best screen-play and best audiography. Kerala State Awards for best film, best direction, best photography, best audiography and best editing.

Festivals: London, Locarno, Tyneside, Hong Kong, Brussels, Antwerp, Figuera da Foz, Nantes, New York, Fribourg, Denver, Durban, La Rochelle, Montpelliere etc.

**Eau-Ganga** (Ganga water) Non-feature/145 Mins/Col1985 Shot this impressionistic film for painter friend

Mr. Viswanathan. Grand Prize, Cinema du Reel Festival, Paris (1986). Major awards at Florence and Malaga festivals.

**Anantaram** (Monologue) 125 Mins/Col/1987

FIPRESCI Prize, Karlovy Vary (1988) National Awards for best direction, best screen-play and best audiography. Kerala State Award for best direction. Festivals: Venice, London, Karlovy Vary, La Rochelle, Nantes, Amiens, New York, Riga, Hawaii, San Francisco, Fribourg, Pesaro, Durban etc.

**Mathilukal** (Walls) 117 Mins/Col/1990 FIPRESCI Prize & UNICEF Film Prize, Venice; OCIC Prize, Amiens (1990). National Awards for best direction, best audiography and best regional film. Festivals: Venice, Toronto, London, Munich, Nantes, Hawaii, Washington, Rotterdam, Istanbul, Haifa, Fribourg, Milan, Amiens, Los Angeles, Vienna, Tehran, Pesaro, New York, Durban etc.

**Vidheyam** (The Servile) 112 Mins/Col/1993 FIPRESCI Prize & Special Jury mention, Singapore (1994), INTER FILM Jury Prize, Mannheim (1994), NETPAC Prize, Rotterdam (1995). National Awards for best actor and best regional film. Kerala State Awards for best film, best direction, best actor and best story. Critics' Prize for best film in the Indian Panorama, IFFI, Calcutta (1994). Festivals: New York, Toronto, Fukuoka, London, Hawaii, Nantes, Rotterdam, Fribourg, Hong Kong, Singapore, Chicago, Sao Paulo, Mannheim, Brussels, Munich, Durban, Gotenberg, San Sebastian, San Francisco, Brisbane, Tehran, Pesaro, Denver etc.

**Kathapurushan** (Man of the Story) \*

107 Mins/Col/1995 FIPRESCI Prize, Bombay (1997)

National Awards for best feature film and best supporting actress. Kerala State Awards for best director, best supporting actress and best supporting actor. Festivals: Toronto, London, Pusan, San Francisco, Hawaii, Nantes, New York, Denver, Singapore, Pesaro, Munich, Karlovy Vary, Fribourg, Vancouver, Figuera da Foz, Innsbruck, Haifa, Los Angeles, New Port Beach, Asahikawa, Akita, Alexandria, Paris, Bradford, Birmingham, Bombay, Dhaka, Rotterdam, Madrid, Grenoble, Leon, Aix En Provence, Guel de Loupe, Cinematheque Paris (Retro)

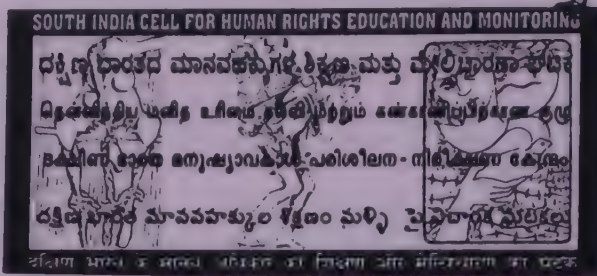
\* All the above films (except 'Eau-Ganga') are in the Malayalam language.

### Short Films

Has scripted, directed, occasionally photographed, recorded sound for, and edited over 25 documentaries and short films. Most significant among them are:

1. 'The Myth' 50 Secs/B&W/1967
2. 'And Man Created.' 8 Mins/B&W/1968
3. 'Guru Chengannur' 18 Mins/Col/1974
4. 'Yakshagana' 17 Mins/Col/1979
5. 'The Chola Heritage' 17 Mins/Col/1980
6. 'Krishnanattam' 16 Mins/Col/1982
7. 'Kalamandalam Gopi' 43 Mins/Col/1999
8. 'Kootiyattam' Mins/Col/2000





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# The Migrant in the City

## The Urban Space in the Hindi cinema of the Fifties

M.K. Raghavendra

**T**he issues of migration and displacement are intimately associated with the portrayal of the city in Indian cinema because 'migration' is implicitly in the direction of the city and tied up to the process of urbanization. Hindi popular cinema of the 1950s was particularly preoccupied with the city and a key motif of the period is that of the displaced outsider in the metropolis. This is true not only of films like Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* (1954) that are regarded as precursors of realism in Indian cinema but also of the early films of Dev Anand and Guru Dutt which are more shamelessly in the popular idiom. Many films of the fifties make a deliberate attempt to see the city from the viewpoint of the displaced outsider but this has more bearing on the discourse of the popular Hindi films with regard to the city than with the actual notion of displacement. This essay concerns itself with popular Hindi cinema of the fifties and is taken up with films that portray the city of the time by employing the motif of the outsider newly come into it.

### II

The fascination exhibited by popular cinema for the city was with good reason: "What has brought rural Indians to the city, or what has at least brought cities to their attention, is their economic dynamism. The nationalist state took up

residence in the city, and it was here too that the Nehruvian ambition to modernise and develop Indian society was scripted and broadcast, radiating outwards across villages. The modernity created here exemplified fully the life of contradictions that India embraced the day it became a democratic republic. India's cities house the entire historical compass of human labour, from the crudest stone-breaking to the most sophisticated financial transactions. Success and failure, marble and mud, are intimately and abruptly pressed against each other, and this has made the cities vibrate with agitated experience. All the enticements of the modern world are stacked up here, but it is also here that many Indians discover the mirage-like quality of this modern world. This experience has altered beliefs, generated new politics, and made cities dramatic scenes of Indian democracy: places where the idea of India is being disputed and defined anew.

"After 1947, Nehru's dominating nationalist ambition in turn set out to recreate the city for its own purposes: to make it not only the symbol of a new sovereignty but an effective engine to drive India into the modern world. The urban world created by the nationalist imagination is certainly no facade—some may still chose to see India's politics or economic development as a pale imitation of a Western paragon, but they can hardly

*Do Bigha Zameen*





do so when confronted by the country's vibrant but sometimes excessively palpable cities"<sup>1</sup>.

The early films of the post-independence era portray the city as a shifting and ambiguous space and many of their protagonists are individuals with their moral roots in the countryside. There are two distinct popular categories in the films of the era in which the protagonist is newly arrived into the city. The first of these shows him or her migrating to the city from a rustic environment—*Do Bigha Zameen*—and the second shows him as newly arrived in the city—Dev Anand's early films like *Taxi Driver* (1954) and Raj Kapoor's *Shri 420* (1953). Both these categories make it apparent that the ethical values essential to the protagonists are easily misplaced in the city and that it is the countryside that is, morally, the more dependable space. In *Naya Daur* the villain is explicitly made to descend from the city to wreck havoc upon village society. A suggestion is also

made in the film that the village is 'desh' and that the city is 'foreign'. The city may awaken our apprehensions but its attractions are also self-evident in the fifties and most films have a curious love-hate relationship with the city. This strange fascination is also evidenced by the numerous films of the period that proclaim themselves through English titles, terms with urban associations—*Passport*, *Paying Guest*, *Howrah Bridge*, *Black Market*, *New Delhi*, *Taxi Driver*, *Footpath*, *House Number 44*, *CID* and *Railway Platform*.

### III

To begin with the category dealing with the migration of agrarian folk to the city, Bimal Roy's film is apparently neither the first nor the most important because K A Abbas had already directed the IPTA-produced *Dharti Ke Lal* in 1946. This film narrates the story of a family of sharecroppers in Bengal at about the time of the Bengal famine (1943-44). The patriarch Samaddar,

*Dharti Ke Lal*







*Do Bigha Zameen*

his elder son Niranjan and daughter-in-law Binodini, his younger son Ramu and second daughter-in-law Radhika live in circumstances that keep them perennially at the mercy of middlemen and the local zamindar. They are forced to sell cheap when the harvest is plentiful only to buy dear in harder times. The early parts of *Dharti Ke Lal* are lyrical and the scenes of marital intimacy between Ramu and Radhika invite comparison with similar sequences from Ray's *Apur Sansar*. There is no evidence of the heavy orchestral music common to love scenes in popular films and the songs rendered are folk songs or classical compositions that are not even playback supported. The film introduces an element of psychological complexity into the narrative by making the childless Binodini envious of the expectant Radhika. A child is born to Radhika and Binodini nurses a desire to kill it, but when their village is ravaged by flood and the family dwelling is nearly submerged Binodini rescues the child after overcoming her initial impulses.

The parts of the film just described are expressive and are even superior to the best examples of agrarian naturalism from India's art cinema. The film is however not content with an honest portrait of rustic life and opts for a more strident discourse and it is in the service of political intent that *Dharti Ke Lal* departs from the realist aesthetic and veers ironically towards popular cinema's essentialist portrayals. The middlemen in *Dharti Ke Lal* are frozen caricatures; apart from appropriating the lands belonging to the family, the Zamindar also harbours lascivious designs towards Radhika and makes veiled suggestions. The film becomes increasingly episodic after the flood and each succeeding episode only serves to illustrate the new levels of wretchedness attained by the family. One of the episodes even shows grass being cooked and eaten by its members to keep off starvation.

Ramu migrates to Calcutta earlier in search of work and over a period his letters become infrequent. When the letters stop altogether the family also moves to



Calcutta where its members have no option but to become beggars. By the end of *Dharti Ke Lal* the patriarch Samaddar is dead and Radhika is reduced to selling herself on the street. Ramu has not encountered the other members of his family in the city yet but, when he has not eaten for days, he agrees to procure for a man from whom he tries to obtain food. When he searches for an acquiescent woman the first one he encounters is his starving wife Radhika. The film ends with the two going back to their village where the other members of their family have commenced an experiment in community farming with the participation of the other villagers. *Dharti Ke Lal* ends optimistically but nothing in the narrative justifies it, although an elaborate song sequence—that includes a chorus with peasants, workers and intellectuals—affirms the confidence of the film in the future. The film is ‘essentialist’ in address, it conceives of the world as immutable but this is not compatible with its expressed belief in social transformation.

*Dharti Ke Lal* was made as a collaborative effort between practitioners linked by faith in the Soviet way of life. Lenin saw the urban proletariat (rather than the agrarian working class) as possessing the revolutionary potential for transforming society and traditional Marxism regards urbanisation as progressive. Why, then,

*Shri 420*



does *Dharti Ke Lal* portray the city as remorselessly as it does? Why do we conclude from its evidence that the city is the home of apathy, that those most comfortable in it are necessarily reprobates, gluttons, dandies or stockbrokers? While *Dharti Ke Lal* has economic and political arguments with regard to the agrarian way of life, it has none with regard to the urban way but views the city with simple loathing. Its portrayal of the city is however not unique because Indian films dealing with agrarian issues have conventionally seen the city in such light, although it is urban India that produces the films.

The city can be equated with modernity and if we make the equation, a hypothesis that explains the existence of the convention derives from Ashis Nandy's suggestion that Indian popular cinema retains traces of affinity to traditional cultures endangered and threatened by the homogenising influences of modernity. As mentioned earlier Nandy sees the great thinkers and social reformers of India of the past two centuries as mediating not only between India's classical and folk traditions but also between the East and the West. He detects the growth of 'lowbrow mediation' between the same variables in later day India<sup>2</sup> and sees cinema as one of its important components. An admirable feature of middle-class culture is its 'disinterestedness', its ability to take up and support causes not its own. Examined in

these contexts, the irrational 'anti-urban' stance taken by films like *Dharti Ke Lal* may well be a sympathetic mode of address directed towards traditional/agrarian cultures under threat from modernity.

Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1954) and Prakash Arora's *Boot Polish* (1954) made for RK Films are other films of the category although the protagonists of *Boot Polish* being 'newly arrived in the city' is not made explicit in the film. The fifties was however not a period particularly conducive to agit-prop cinema and, regardless of the attention they have received, both these films must be regarded as honourable failures. Bimal Roy's film begins as social criticism and tells the story of Shambhu a poor peasant who





Shri 420

migrates to Calcutta in search of greener pastures. His land is to be forfeited to the Zamindar if he does not pay certain dues within three months and he believes the opportunities in the city will yield the required sum. The problem with Roy's film stems from the arbitrary misfortunes he heaps upon his protagonist in an attempt to channel our sympathies in his direction. The portrayal of the city also relies largely upon the familiar reproaches heaped upon its citizenry and this makes the film predictable and uninteresting. The film is perhaps closer to *Dharti Ke Lal*, which also neglects to examine the space of the city and grant it characteristics of its own. *Do Bigha Zamin* did not do well commercially and this can be attributed to its adopting a left-wing pessimistic posture quite at odds with the spirit of its times as observed by a contemporary reviewer: "it is very odd that, at this early moment of Indian independence, any Indian director should make so savagely pessimistic a film... Not only is it a harsh film but, in the manner of Italian neo-realism, it gives an extraordinary vivid picture in a great city..."<sup>3</sup> The passage just cited comes from a review contemporary to the release of the film but the film is by no means comparable to the work of the

neo-realists. The neo-realists were responding to the historical situation in which they were placed and fulfilled a definite need but Roy's film works contrary to the ethos of its times. It suffers from the other Marxist afflictions of the period and, not even answering to the tenets of realism, its problem is also that: "The village/city divide, like the good peasant/evil moneylender divide, is of course an old theme in literature and cinema. Roy is not quite able to transcend the burden of this inheritance in the interests of realism so as to allow both to emerge as complex entities."<sup>4</sup>

*Boot Polish* is another example of 'left-wing pessimism' although it attempts to sport an optimistic mask. Prakash Arora directed *Boot Polish* but much of its method is probably attributable to Raj Kapoor. This film is about two children brought up in misery by their wicked aunt in a Bombay slum. Bholu and Belu are forced to beg until Uncle John, a good-hearted bootlegger, persuades them to take up the honest trade of shining shoes. The film is considered 'optimistic' because of a rousing marching song **Nanhe Munhe Bachche** which exhorts children to control their own destinies but, somewhat perversely, it opts for a 'happy' resolution in which two



generous people take Bhola and Belu under their care. For all its 'humanism' *Boot Polish* does not even betray a fundamental interest in the logistics of shining shoes. The preparation preliminary to this activity makes it most convenient for a shoeshine to occupy a fixed position—from which pedestrians can be accosted. Unmindful of this possibility, Bhola and Belu pursue their quarries on foot and the film uses the pathos inherent in this approach to wring tears out of us. The intervention of accidents (both fortunate and unfortunate) in the destinies of their protagonists makes the social discourses of films like *Do Bigha Zamin* and *Boot Polish* suspect.

#### IV

A much more cheerful category is the fifties film in which the city becomes an object of fascination for the newly arrived migrant. Raj Kapoor's *Shri 420* may be a *Boot Polish*

seminal film of this category but since our interest is more with the city than with the issue of migration, we will examine *Taxi Driver* here. Chetan Anand's *Taxi Driver* (1954) has Dev Anand in his best-known proletarian role. In this film Mangal drives a taxi in the streets of Bombay and accidentally meets Mala when a group of delinquents climb in with her. Mangal becomes involved when the men take Mala to a deserted spot and try to rob or molest her. He saves her and learns that she has come to Bombay to become a playback singer and is in search of a music director named Ratanlal. Mangal gives Mala shelter in his spare lodgings and Mala briefly dresses up as a boy named Rajput to become Mangal's cleaner. The hoodlums who are involved with the film industry, while also being actively engaged in crime, reappear and try to use Mangal's taxi to rob a bank. There are other twists and turns and Mala finds employment elsewhere but returns to Mangal and the

narrative is resolved happily after a dramatic climax.

*Taxi Driver* is perhaps less important than some of Dev Anand's other films of the period but it has facets that make it intriguing. The protagonist thrives in the city but the brief appearance of a 'Bhabhi' from a village suggests that his roots are actually in the countryside and that this makes him morally more dependable. The film also has a 'club dancer' named Sylvie who loves Mangal but who is killed in a final shootout. Mangal's attitude towards the unsavoury aspects of the city is not one of outrage but rather one of accommodation, his preferred environment





being the shifting ambience of night club where he and his friends hang out.

Many of the films of this period take recourse to the motif of the 'club dancer' although the career of the actress Helen became fruitful only afterwards. Even *Jaal* (which is not set in the Indian city) has a 'modern dance' routine in a restaurant. These observations ultimately leave us wondering about the discourse of the 'club dance'. In some films a relatively important actress (Geeta Bali in *Baazi*, Shiela Ramani in *Taxi Driver*) plays the club dancer, in which case the protagonist becomes an object of the dancer's love. Other films have only brief dances with the dancer herself not being given an important role within the narrative. Since the club dance routine is not employed to titillate the audience, as tends to happen in later films with actresses like Padma Khanna and Faryal, what function does it perform within the narrative? In these early films, the night club is not a glamorous but a decidedly sleazy space in which the dancer is apparently trying to create the illusion of the West. The only explanation that seems to fit the experience of the early club dance is that it stands as a metaphor for the mixed results of the modernising imperative. In films like *Baazi* where the protagonist is caught between the traditional heroine and the 'westernised' dancer the final triumph of 'tradition' is perhaps a kind of cultural reassurance.

Guru Dutt's *Baazi* (1951) is an early film intended as a vehicle for its star Dev Anand but it contains elements not found in the cinema of the period. Here again (as in *Boot Polish*) there is no explicit indication that the protagonist is newly come to the city. But the contrast between his family life and that of the others in the city suggests that he is meant to represent the migrant who has made himself at ease in the city. *Baazi* narrates the story of a professional gambler named Madan (Dev Anand). When the film begins Madan is playing in a dingy roadside dive and the man who enters is impressed by his prowess. This man offers him a job with the mysterious 'Seth' who owns and operates from the 'Star Hotel'. The next scene is set in the hotel where the hero is befriended by a dancer named Leena who leads him to the shadowy 'boss' whose identity is unknown.



*Baazi*

Madan's job is to lead rich people who come to the city looking for excitement to the hotel's gaming tables.

We soon learn that Madan has an ailing sister for whose treatment he needs finance, and that he engages in his activities only on this account. In the process of having her treated Madan runs into a lady doctor named Rajani who diagnoses the ailment as Tuberculosis. Rajani, who lives with a wealthy father, has a police inspector named Ramesh paying court to her. Ramesh has been searching for the men behind the illegal activities at Star Hotel but even its close surveillance has been in vain. Ramesh now receives news from an informer that a new employee named Madan has now joined the enterprise.

Madan begins to see more of Rajani but the girl worries when he begins to show unexplained signs of prosperity. One day, when Madan escorts Rajani home and bids her a fond farewell, Rajani's father sees them quietly from a distance and we find a funny expression suffusing his face. The dancer Leena, meanwhile, becomes more attached to Madan and one day, when the two are seated in a restaurant, they find a pair of grim eyes upon them—those of Rajani's father. A few days later Madan meets Rajani and her father at the sanatorium where his sister is admitted. On the way back, as Rajani is dozing in her seat, her father asks



Madan what he does for a living and forces Madan out of the car when his reply is unsatisfactory.

Shortly after the episode Madan goes to meet the boss who abruptly reveals his identity as Rajani's father. He offers Madan money to stay away from his daughter, which Madan declines to accept. He then instructs Rajani to stay away from Madan and Ramesh also echoes this sentiment. Ramesh summons Madan to the police station to warn him and we see Madan becoming quite wary. After one or two episodes involving a prince in search of excitement, the boss decides to get rid of Madan. He enlists the help of Leena under threat to her life and she lures Madan to Star Hotel to be finally eliminated. When the actual attempt to 'hit' Madan takes place Leena comes between him and the gunman and she is killed. Madan has been seen alone with her at the time of her death and he is therefore arrested, tried and sentenced to death for her killing. To ensure Madan's silence the boss threatens him with the life of his sister.

Ramesh himself is not satisfied with the verdict and visits Madan to make him talk but this is in vain. Ramesh suspects Rajani's father and traps him into a confession—after claiming to have knowledge of his acts and pretending to be tacitly acquiescent. Madan is given a light sentence for minor misdemeanours and released thereafter; he is finally reunited with Rajani.

*Baazi* is unusual for the way in which it employs many of Hollywood's diagetic codes. Point-of-view filming is frequently employed and crosscutting is often in evidence. The information about Rajani's father's real occupation is deferred until his behaviour becomes inexplicably strange. Parental figures surrender their morally privileged position within the narrative and yet, *Baazi* is not forced into an ethical limbo. The film creates a 'real' ambience clearly identifiable with the urban spaces of particular period and this opens the film to history although historical references are not explicitly made. *Baazi* makes a genuine attempt to grapple with the contrary emotions aroused by the city in the fifties and this makes it immensely revealing.

## V

We see each of the films just examined responding in its own way to the city of the fifties and, as has already been made clear, these are also responses to the vision of a modern India propagated at the time. The city of the fifties evokes the most ambivalent of emotions because it embodies the temptations of the modernising imperative even as this imperative represents a threat to a major part of the populace. Alongside the more optimistic portrayals of the city in the films of Dev Anand and Guru Dutt (that nevertheless incorporate darker elements) is the one-sided portrayal in films like *Do Bigha Zamin*. There is however one aspect of the 'threat' present in the cinematic portrayal of urban spaces that merits attention. It is usually the films after 1947 that approach the city ambivalently because films like Mehboob Khan's *Anmol Ghadi* (1946) view the city with no sign of uneasiness at all. Since we cannot believe that the city began to induce dread among its citizens abruptly after Independence, it is apt to see the 'darkness' as a democratic questioning of the modernist drive. After 1947 Indians suddenly became responsible for the destiny confronting their nation and these ambivalent portrayals were perhaps not only expressions of concern but also a way of accepting responsibility. One reason for the relative lack of variance in the Marxist position after Independence—*Dharti Ke Lal* and *Do Bigha Zamin* are not different in their methods—may be that Marxists could not quite regard a 'bourgeois' government as essentially different from the colonial one. The films are deeply critical of society but the viewpoint of the criticism is also that of an outsider who does not feel 'responsible'. This is perhaps what makes the pessimistic films like *Do Bigha Zamin* also less valuable to us.

### Notes:

1. *The Idea of India*—Sunil Khilnani, Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1998, 109.
2. *An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema*—Ashis Nandy, Deep Focus Vol I No I, December 1987—Paper presented at INTACH seminar on Visual Anthropology
3. *Film India: Looking Backward*, 34, cited by Sumita S 'Chakravarty in *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993.
4. Ibid.



# The Organisation of Time in *Agraharathil Kazhuthai*

## An Analysis of one sequence

R. Nandakumar

In many of his published and unpublished statements about his celebrated film, *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (Donkey in the Brahmin Colony, Tamil, b/w, 1979), John Abraham had compared it to a folk poem or a fable. He never bothered to explain nor could he possibly have, least given to theorizing as he was. Certain aspects of the film like its apparently farcical and quizzical narrative content, are rightly the sort of stuff that fables are made of. Apart from that, the aspect of the organization of narrative time also has more than a touch of the folk about it, as will be shown here. There are film-makers who have drawn on known folk material as Mani Kaul did in *Duvidha*. Mani Kaul has stated at length how he went about the formal problem of the filmic adaptation of the folk material in the Straussian terms of an editing pattern of inside/ outside, dark/ light, etc. and a corresponding use of colour scheme. In the Donkey film, there is a sequence towards the middle, which may be called the seduction sequence, that shuffles about the narrative time which in every other sense conforms to a simple linear progression. Like an epilogue colours our experience of the narrative retroactively and a prologue sets the tone of the narrative that is to follow, this sequence that occurs in the middle acts back and forth on our perception of time within the narrative structure and prompts us to experience it in a way different from its apparent linearity.

To recount the narrative, the plot-line of the film is here briefly outlined. Professor Narayanaswamy sees an orphaned stray donkey calf near his rented house in the city. He takes pity on the poor animal and brings it to his house, deciding to rear it. Neighbours make

sneaky enquiries and word goes around about the professor's curious ways. Ignoring the snide remarks of students and colleagues and putting up with the objections of neighbours, Narayanaswamy keeps the donkey in his house and rears it with great care. After not too long, the principal of the college intervenes and asks Narayanaswamy to mend his ways as it amounts to a breach of decorum on the part of a professor. Narayanaswamy takes the donkey calf home to his village where his old parents live. There he leaves it to the care of a deaf-mute girl who is specially engaged for that purpose. As the donkey is taboo for the Brahmin, it creates much resentment at home and a ruckus in the neighbourhood. Narayanaswamy joins back the college.

Returning home for the vacation, Narayanaswamy sees the donkey happily growing up under the care of the deaf-mute. He spends time feeding and nursing it. His parents and his brother do not express their distaste other than by telling him how the whole family has become the butt of abuse and ridicule on account of the donkey business. The father tells Narayanaswamy how he keeps receiving complaints about the mess created by the donkey in the neighbourhood. Once it has messed up a whole seemantham ceremony by straying into some house. Another complaint relates to how it has knocked down an old lady as she was returning from the temple pond. Again, it has spoiled the religious ritual of a homam and thrown everything into disarray. The vacation over, Narayanaswamy gets back to the college.

Back home, things were getting worse for the donkey and the family of Narayanaswamy, as well. The deaf-





A - 1



A - 2



A - 3



A - 6(1)



A - 5



A - 6(2)





### A - 6(3)

mute woman is seduced by a scoundrel. The donkey enters the temple precincts and grazes there freely. Once when the temple priest tries to chase it away, it kicks him and he falls flat on the ground, injuring himself. The Brahmin elders decide to dispose off the animal by giving it away to the washermen. The deaf-mute is sent back from home. On his return Narayanaswamy learns what has happened to the donkey in his absence. With the help of the deaf-mute he traces the washerman and fetches the donkey back from him. He leaves for the college again.

In the meantime the deaf-mute becomes pregnant and she gives birth to a still-born baby. The sanctity of the temple is ritually defiled as the discarded body of a still-born child is seen in the temple precincts where the donkey also is seen nearby. All the Brahmin residents of the locality are outraged at the sacrilege. They assemble in front of the temple and decide that the donkey should be done away with. The job was left to the hirelings who take the donkey to a hillock outside the village where it is lynched to death. The calm that was thus brought to the village was soon unsettled by a series of events. People get visions of the donkey at night. Miracles happen, like the home coming of a long-lost son, an old crippled woman regaining her power of walking, a couple long resigned to childlessness overjoyed at the thought of the child they are expecting and so on. The villagers assemble to get a glimpse of the apparition of the donkey. They decide to build a temple consecrated to the donkey.

Returning home, Narayanaswamy learns what has happened to the donkey and is agitated. With the help of the deaf-mute, Narayanaswamy traces the place where the donkey was buried. He hands over its skull to the same group of hirelings who killed the donkey. They set the skull on flame and do a ritual dance in invocation of the all-consuming fire. The village goes up in flames.

### Description of the sequence

The following description of what we have called the seduction sequence is meant to give only an idea of its structure and does not reproduce the exact shot divisions. Though we have here taken it as a single sequence, there are in fact four separate, though in many respects identical, sequences that make up the larger whole. The sequences are mentioned by letters and the shots in each are numbered respectively.

- A.1. Close up of Narayanaswamy's father who is telling his son some complaint he has received about the donkey and the trouble it makes.
- A.2. Cut to the person at the door complaining about the donkey.
- A.3. Cut to a long shot of an old woman with tottering steps, supporting herself with a stick, coming along the road. A mischievous-looking lanky lad and his accomplice untie the donkey and bring it to the road and stretch the rope across. The old woman trips over it. The man seen complaining at Narayanaswamy's door in the previous shot, comes and helps her to her feet. The shot is silent as we see the gestures of the man shouting and swearing at the donkey. They walk along.
- A.4. Cut back to Narayanaswamy in his house, in close medium without the father in frame.
- A.5. Cut to the father sitting on a swing cot in the house, to the left and the son to the right, in far medium. The deaf-mute enters the frame from right—hand bottom. She goes out of frame.
- A.6. Cut to a long shot of the deaf-mute walking towards the camera. In the foreground to the right is seen an abandoned icon of *yoni*, associated with the Sakteya cult of the female principle. A loafer,



sitting idly on a culvert, stretches his legs across the narrow footpath, obviously to block her way. She steps aside to avoid him and walks past. The fellow follows her as she walks forward and turns right. Now she is in front of the remains of an old dilapidated temple. He catches hold of her hand, she shakes it off and walks ahead and goes off frame.

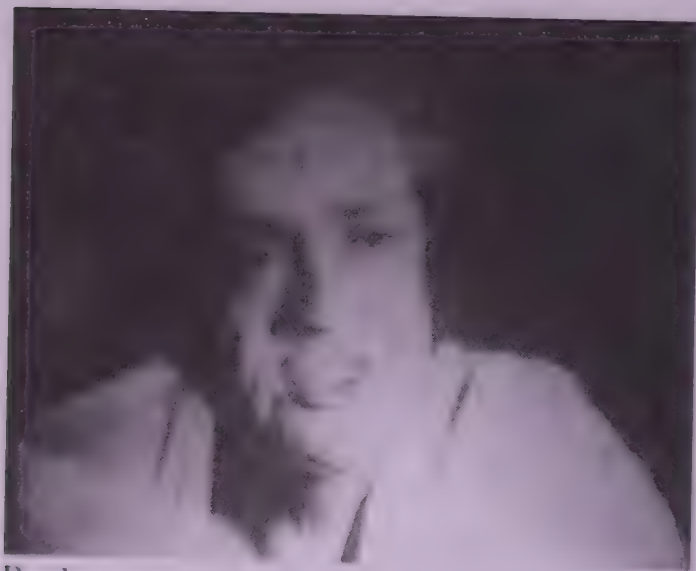
- B.1. Close up of Narayanaswamy's father as he tells another complainer about the donkey to his son, exactly as in shot A.1.
- B.2. Cut to another complainer in close medium, outside the door, holding the pillar.
- B.3. The same lanky lad and friends bringing the donkey to a house and pushing it inside. The donkey straying into the room where some ritual is going on. The commotion it creates.
- B.4. The complainer shouting with gestures exactly as he appeared at the door of Narayanaswamy's house in shot B. 2, but of course, is now in a different place.
- B.5. Cut to Narayanaswamy's father in far medium, sitting on the swing cot. As the deaf-mute enters from right-hand bottom with the donkey, exactly as in shot A.5, the frame widens to include Narayanaswamy who is now on the right and the father on the left. She goes off frame laterally to the left.



B - 2



B - 3/1



B - 1



B - 3/11





B - 4



B - 6(1)



B - 5(1)



B - 6(2)



B - 5(2)



B - 6(3)



B.6. Cut to the same location in the outdoor as in A.6.

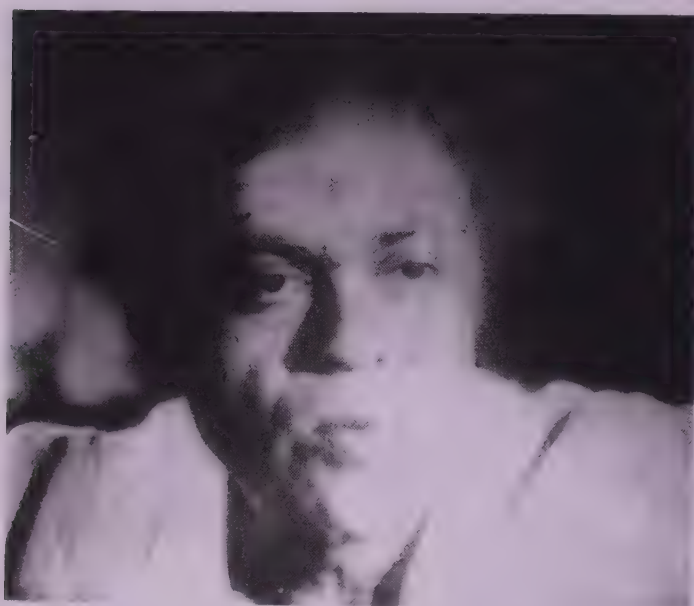
The deaf-mute walks towards the camera, entering from long. The rogue blocks her way but she gently lifts his legs and helps herself to make her way. As she walks forward and turns to right, she is followed by the rogue who catches hold of her hand. They are now in front of the abandoned temple, exactly as before. She gently and without much resistance frees herself from his grasp and walks out of frame.

C.1. Close up of Narayanaswamy's father reporting the next complaint.

C.2 Cut to the complainer at the door.



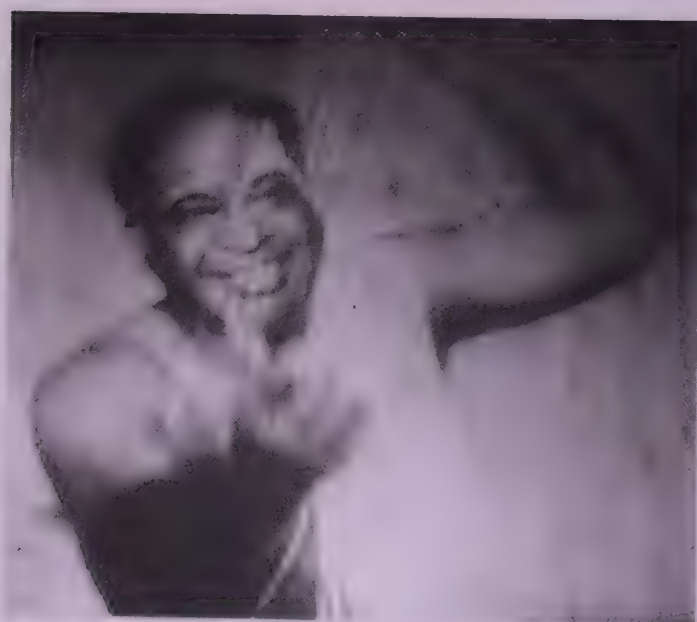
C - 5



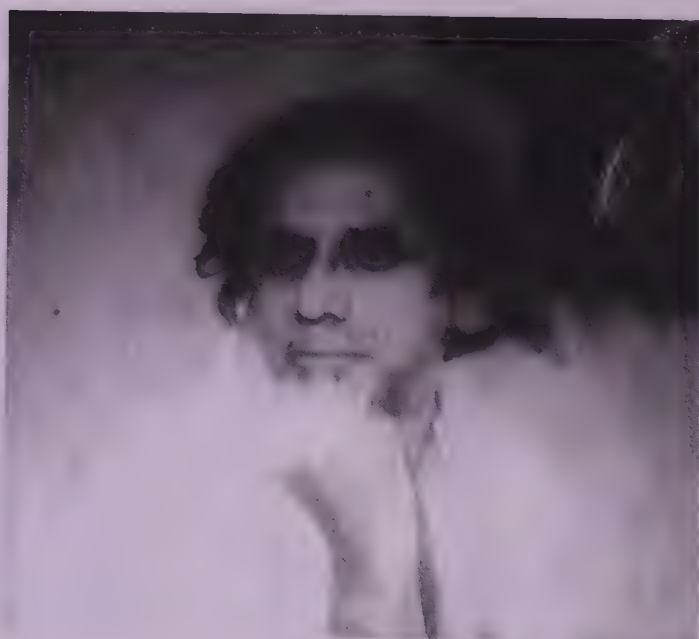
C - 1



C - 6



C - 2



C - 7(1)





C - 7(2)



C - 8(1)



C - 8(2)



C - 8(3)

- C.3. Cut to the outdoor. The bearded old man beckoning the lanky lad and making some gestures, pointing at the nearby house. After some initial hesitation, the boy agrees.
- C.4. The boy leads the donkey by the rope and pushes it inside the house.
- C.5. Cut to the interior of the house. The scene of a seemantham ceremony (a ceremony to felicitate a woman in the seventh month of her first pregnancy) in progress. The donkey barges in, to the utter bewilderment of everyone.
- C.6. The complainer, together with the other aggrieved, standing in a group in front of his house and cursing the donkey.
- C.7. Cut back to Narayanaswamy in close medium. Cut to the twosome shot of Narayanaswamy and his father, into which frame the deaf-mute enters with the donkey from right -hand bottom towards left and goes off frame as before.
- C.8. Cut to the outdoor. The deaf-mute enters from long, walking towards the camera, exactly as before. The rogue does not block the way but only gets up and follows her. He intercepts her



exactly at the place where he did so in the previous two shots. She gives in and is led into the abandoned temple. Shots suggestive of the actual seduction.

- D.1. Close up of Narayanaswamy's father about to narrate yet another complaint he received about the donkey.
- D.2. Cut to the bearded old man at the door, making some deploring gestures.
- D.3. The lanky lad is approached by a certain fellow who has already appeared as a complainer in one of the earlier scenes. He persuades the apparently reluctant boy to undertake some errand and presses some money into his hand. The boy unties the donkey from where it was tethered and leads to the nearby house. Shots of the interior of the house where the bearded old man is performing some puja. The donkey making its appearance in the room where it is the last thing on earth to be expected. Outraged by the abhorrence, the old man chases it out. The deaf-mute comes there in time and takes the donkey back home.
- D.4. The bearded old man standing in front of his house makes deploring and condemning gestures in the direction of Narayanaswamy's house.
- D.5. Close up of Narayanaswamy apparently bemused at the story.



D - 1



D - 3



D - 5

- D.6. Cut to Narayanaswamy sitting on the right and the father sitting on the swing cot on the left. The deaf-mute enters with the donkey exactly as in all the other previous shots and goes off frame.
- D.7. For the first time in this sequence, the deaf-mute is seen going out from the house, closing the door behind.
- D.8. Shots of Narayanaswamy and the girl grazing the donkey and playing with it.
- D.9. After a few shots, the deaf-mute is seen feeding the donkey which is now tethered in the place





1) - 6

where the scoundrel used to be on her trail in the early scenes. The fellow enters in mid-frame at middle distance and accosts her quite casually. They both go inside the abandoned temple as naturally as they can.

### **Analysis: Temporal**

As may be seen, the modular and serial ordering of corresponding shots at their regular points of recurrence in all the four sequences (with one change in the fourth), has something schematic about it. From the close ups of Narayanaswamy's father who starts the narrative every time with "One day...", through the shots of the complainer at the door, the way Narayanaswamy and his father are seated in the shots when every time it is cut back to the present after the misdeed of the donkey, the entrance of the deaf-mute in the same shots, to finally, the appearance of the deaf-mute in long shot in the exterior, it creates a narrative space in a *mise en abyme*<sup>1</sup> structure. The only 'variable' shots in these serially ordered sequences made up of regular, repetitive units are those depicting the misdeed of the donkey in each. In the fourth, when it breaks the serial alignment, the sequence falls out of the schema to merge with the course of events in the present.

The parallel sub-plot of the seduction that is introduced at this point in the narrative appears incidental to the theme that is centred around the

donkey. It is unfolded in the three sequences through as many shots (A.6, B.6, C.8) each at the point of transition of an *analepse*<sup>2</sup> (related to the donkey) to the narrative present in three successive scenes (A.5, B.5, C.7). These former three shots placed at regular intervals use a repetitive pattern of overlapping action which is made the less felt because of their relatively incidental manner of interpolation and their placement far between. But equally, every time each of these shots is preceded by a cut back to the present which occur thrice serially, marking the end of a 'narrated' episode, these shots seem to engage the narrative present of the story time. Moreover, the first part of the twosome alignment of shots (the deaf-mute coming in with the donkey) is underplayed by making it a background movement that is only peripheral to the thematic significance of the narrative. And structurally, these shots that occur four times in the sequence are one with the narrative present. Though the three donkey-episodes are narrated by Prof. Narayanaswamy's father over a span of time separated by days, the successive manner of their cutting back to the present compresses them into a continuous present. This narrative present that is thus dilated and is held still, is discreetly stretched at a tangent by the gradual advancement of action in the seduction theme through the successive shots. Against this stretching of the narrative present and the *analepse* each of the three cut away, the seduction theme that evolves at a tangent is felt to move ahead as a *prolepse*, creating a subtle inflection of the discourse time. In the twosome shot alignment—first, of the deaf-mute coming in with the donkey into the house and the second, shots involving her and her seducer, separated by an entire sequence of the misdeed of the donkey—the former marks the narrative present as a constant while the latter functions as its continuation. If the constancy of the former shots in their repetition (they are not the same stock shots repeated but are taken separately, with subtle variations) accentuates the narrative present, the overlapping of action in measured gradations in the latter shots (they do not use the editing pattern of cross-cutting between two parallel actions to stretch time) marks the



passage of time. The way the action of the sub-plot is advanced through overlapping gradations, considering its incidental nature in the sequence at that point and the crucial turn it gives to the course of events yet to come, is felt retroactively as a prolepsis (not in the syntagmatic sense). The interaction between the constancy of the former unit of the shot alignment, on the one hand and the forward movement that the latter unit bears along, on the other, both of which are structurally aligned at regular transitional points and thematically, between episodes, creates an inflection in the organisation of the discourse time. This coincidence of prolepsis and analepsis within the same sequence and the regularity of their repetition within the cyclical schema goes to superimpose the 'retold' incidents one over the other so that they do not gain in dramatic momentum on the vertical axis, even as it engages the narrative present as a continuous dimension on the horizontal axis of narrative/story time.

The pattern of the twosome alignment of shots and their repetition at similar points of transition in the three successive sequences is shuffled about in the fourth, where only the former unit of the deaf-mute returning with the donkey is in its usual place, marking the end of the analepsis. The latter unit of the seduction theme, through a deliberate mismatch, does not follow immediately in the same repetitive pattern and occurs only much later, related to other events in their usual course and more definitely in the duration of the narrative present. Such that the pattern of serial repetition of the ordering of shots (that is, the deaf-mute coming in with the donkey and later, the shots involving the seducer) does not lead to what otherwise would have been a closure of the sequence, leaving it complete in itself. Not only is the latter shot involving the seducer placed farther from the usual point of transition (that is, following the cut back of the donkey episode to the present with shots of Narayanaswamy and his father), but there is also no similarity in the pattern of action or framing that characterized the respective shots in the earlier sequences. Here, it happens with a casual naturalness, as if that is the way it is, as a matter of course. Moreover, there is no

transition to suggest a shift in either place or time, and the action (of the seducer walking into the frame where the deaf-mute was already there for a while) is well within the duration of the narrative present, with which the whole seduction theme thus gets aligned. The horizontal randomness that characterizes the accentless progression of the filmic narrative is expressive of a concept of reality that keeps to the order of things bound by time and change, not as any inevitability. That is also why even scenes like the killing of the donkey or the setting of the village on fire have the distant air of a ritual re-enactment.

In each of these sequences, as it cuts away from the narrative present to what would usually be a flash back, it shows the actual events centred around the donkey that had transpired as different from the complainer's version and what they are made out to be. As it does not use the conventions of marking the cinematic analepsis of 'flash back' as say, the close up of the narrator or fade out, each of the donkey episodes finds its place along the axis of the narrative time as the narrator's present, implying the author as the absent narrator. The silence imposed on the overt actors in the donkey episodes is the voice of the author as the absent narrator. Though the sequences are serially separate, they are held together among themselves by the parallel sub-plot of the seduction that is consistently advanced after each such episode, thus assigning it to a different coordinate of discourse time.

The manner of repetition of the twosome alignment of shots involving the deaf-mute, at the transitional point each of a cut back, serves as a staccato pause, punctuating the linearity of narrative time, much as it is close to the use of refrains in a folk poem. Thematically conveying the burden of the poem, the relation of the refrains to the events and incidents at the point at which they recur in the folk narrative, is one of counterpoint, serving as elliptical transitions in the narrative progression and thus making the temporal dimension schematic. The narrative present in the film is thus held still at one point that is dilated, so to say, as each of the analepsis sequences is superimposed one over the other. But even as the narrative present is thus



held still and the movement underplayed, the discourse time evolves at a tangent punctuated by the repetition of shots as well as by the overlapping pattern of advancement of action in the seduction theme. The peculiar experience of the temporal dimension of the whole sequence that lends itself to the film as a whole, is achieved through an interplay between the cyclical schema of the synchronic discourse time and the linearity of the diachronic narrative time, as only film can do.

## Spatial

A consideration of the spatial aspects like camera angles, composition, directional movement and the patterns of choreography, would show how they have a bearing on the underlying temporal organization we have been discussing. In the shots of the *agrahara* (the Brahmin village), both interior and exterior, the camera is generally static and the frames are frontal and closed. In the exterior shots of the *agrahara* with its rows of houses, the frames follow the drab lay out of its topography, expressive of the rigidity of convention-bound lives inside. Interestingly, the same pattern of framing and centralized composition is used in the shots of the college (the spire, the rigid geometry of right angled corridors, etc) and the temple (the tower, up frontally in midframe, as distinct from the scenes with the abandoned temple in the background). The shots of the cloistered interior of the houses have an air of congealed space, in contrast to the exterior away from the *agrahara*, where the frames are wide and have the quality of movement and light.

The dominant direction and rhythmic thrust of camera movement is generally lateral, especially in the shots of the exterior. The burden of this directional movement of the frame is juxtaposed against the stylized movements within the frame that are either exactly on the middle vertical axis of the frame or diagonal to it, or are frenetically choreographed. For example, the shot of the lean Brahmin running down the stairs in front of the temple, sent on the errand to fetch the village midwife, panicked at the

sight of the still-born child in the temple precincts. This highly formalized and exacting shot, with the motif of the temple *gopura* in centralized and up frontal composition, is austere held on while the only movement within the frame is that of the Brahmin running down. The alignment of the camera angle along the middle axis of the scene renders the dramatically foreshortened movement of running down, a schematic spatial motif that accentuates the underlying staticity of the frame. It is all the more important to note that the lens used is not one like, say, a telephoto that would have flattened the field and narrowed the frame. Or again, take the example of the movement of the deaf-mute as she enters every time with the donkey, which is invariably diagonal from right to left. Against this, the movement of the deaf-mute in the following shots of the outdoor where, after walking a short stretch towards the camera, she invariably turns and walks diagonally from left to right and goes off frame, can be seen to be a reversal of the former. These two movements, in fact, strike a rhythmic counterpoint between them. Contrast these with the choreographed movements as in the killing of the donkey, the bizarre dance of the funeral procession, the final dance of fire and so on.

Lastly, we must also note that the image-configurations and their binary conjunctions that are iconographic in significance derive their ideational undertones precisely from this schema-like, the milking cow/the dead calf; the dead donkey mother/the forsaken donkey calf; the abandoned temple/act of seduction; the imposing temple *gopura*/the body of the still born child; the 'resurrection' of the donkey/the seducer among the crowd of worshippers; skull/fire; the deaf-mute/the goddess of destruction, and so on.

The *mise en abyme* structure of the scenes of this sequence (the father telling Narayanaswamy of some complaint about the donkey; shots of the complainer at the door; silent shots of the actual incident that was the cause of complaint; shots of the deaf mute coming in with the donkey; shots of Narayanaswamy and his father; shots of the rogue



making advances at the deaf-mute) produces an interpretive space in which things are not what they are said to be. It is indeed a dialogic space through different voices where, paradoxically, the dominant motif is voicelessness itself. But this speechlessness (of the animal and the deaf-mute) suddenly assumes the doubled speech of speaking from within the object spoken about and is subsumed in the silence of the narrator.

I thank Mr. Shaji N.Karun, former Chairman of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, for his kind help in making available the print of the film under discussion from the archives of the Academy, enabling me to select the stills to illustrate my argument.

## Notes

1. Here, the word is not used in its strict sense of referring to the narrative device suggesting infinite regression, almost like the unending serial reflection, one within the other, of an object between two perpendicular mirrors facing each other, as for example, in some of the writings of Borges and Italo Calvino. In the sequence under discussion, the ordering of scenes one 'within' the other, is suggestive of a possible regression in time.
2. The word is preferred to 'flash back' because of its connotations, which in the narratological sense are more than that of a cinematic technique to which the latter term tends to limit them. So is the word prolepsis to 'flash forward', though of course, as Seymour Chatman says: "Flash backs and forwards are only media-specific instances of the larger classes of analepsis and prolepsis." Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press (London 1978), p.63

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# Migration and Displacement:

## Aravindan's Vaastuhara - a case study

Vasanti Sankaranarayanan

**B**irds migrate in search of water and food. Animals too migrate from forests to plains, mostly in search of food and water. Human beings also have migrated from land to land in search of means of living. The Aryan migration from Central Europe to various parts of Asia is a historical example of human migration. In Australia, the earliest known indigenous people, the Aborigines moved from place to place in search of water. They always settled down around the places where they could find water. So the primal instinct of man for migration is finding of food and water. But the texture and cause of migration have undergone several changes over the years. Wars and other types of conflicts have also resulted in large scale migration. In recent Indian History, one of the greatest migrations took place after the partition of India into India and Pakistan. The agony of migration from the surroundings that one is used to figures in all of Ritwik Ghatak's films, he himself was a migrant from East Bengal due to the partition of the country.

There has been another type of migration from the Southern part of India—Tamil Nadu and Kerala and especially from Kerala. This was not motivated by war or conflict. Kerala is a small agrarian state, with limited potential for industrialisation on account of social, political and cultural factors. In the earlier times, land was in the hands of a select few who employed the other sections as labourers to cultivate the land. These labourers did not have any possessions. They were themselves the possessions of their landlords. Their living conditions were very poor and they lived in abject conditions. So, they began to migrate, mostly as bonded labourers in the Rubber, Tea and other such estates built up by the British. They migrated to other parts of India and countries such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia and other South East Asian countries. Though they kept

in touch with the country of their origin, many of them became settlers/citizens of the countries to which they migrated—buying land, building houses, bringing up children etc. Even now in Kerala, the economic situation and the employment prospects are such that migration in search of better living has become a constant factor of the life of people. The migration in the seventies and eighties were to the Gulf countries which were developing and had a great need for skilled and unskilled workers. Even now the migration to the Middle East continues; however, the momentum has slowed down because the development process in those countries is almost complete.

There is essentially a difference in the character and psychology of migrants who are forced to migrate on account of war, famine or other disasters of nature and the migrants who migrate in search of a better living and better financial prospects. The former are forced to migrate on account of fear of death and loss of their possessions. They are desperate. They do not have any other choice. They are victims who have not moved on their own. So, they find it very difficult to integrate with the culture, ethos, and milieu of the places to which they have migrated. They nurture a grievance towards the situation that forced them to give up the place of their origin, the way of life they are used to. Their psychological attitude to life is filled with a nostalgia for the world they have lost. Given a choice, they might not have moved at all; or, they would have moved to places of their own choice and not places which give them asylum reluctantly. They are called "refugees", and in more than one sense they are seeking refuge from the perils that they had to confront on account of factors over which they had no control. The migrants who seek better ways of living are not that desperate; they have moorings; they can, if they



want to, go back to their countries or lands of origin. They have not been cut off from their homelands or origins. Theirs is often a temporary migration to a land of better prospects and better financial gains. While they do enjoy the material comforts and privileges that a developed country can offer, they are nostalgic about their homelands and try to preserve the social and cultural aspects of those places. They are in a position to retain ties with their homeland and even build up a better life in these places, by buying assets saving their earnings. Such migrants feel comfortable in both surroundings—in the country of their origin as well as the country to which they have migrated. Often such migrations result in assimilations of social habits, especially dress, food and living habits of the migrants. Mostly the habits of the migrant country are incorporated into the habits of the native land. In some ways the native country's habits such as language and cultural habits find their way into the migrant country also. A supreme example of this is the acceptance of Malayalam as one of the official languages in countries such as Dubai.

We always tend to talk about the gains and losses of migration. The gains are mostly for the migrants who migrated in search of a better living on their own accord. The losses are mostly felt by people who have been forced to migrate on account of natural disasters such as the earthquakes in Iran or Mexico, the Narmada Valley Dam, or the Partition of India or wars such as the Second World War. On the material plane, the migrants who have left on their own accord, have a better standard of living, better wages and better prospects in life. On the social plane also, they are able to retain to some extent the habits and customs of their country of origin even as they adopt those of the migrant country. On the cultural plane, they desperately try to retain some of the cultural traits and yearnings through the formation of cultural societies and celebration of events and festivals. This works out well in the case of a first generation migrant who still is nostalgic enough to retain some kind of link with the native land. But, with the second and third generation of migrants, who are not even familiar with

their parents' native lands, the situation is different. They integrate with the social, political and cultural habits of the country of settlement easier than their parents. In fact, they do not have any nostalgia about the country of origin of their parents. The conflicts begin when the parents try to impose their old cultural and social values on their children. The gulf widens through practices such as inter caste, community marriages. The children inherit a mixed culture which is very good in one sense even though there is a diminishing of the traditional culture and habits. It is only the generation which have known the country of origin, its habits, cultural and social values and had to change on account of migration who feel a sense of loss and displacement. Also with the immigration laws being what they are in most countries, the migrants invariably have only a secondary citizen status. This affects their morale to a very great extent. There is discrimination, in differing degrees towards immigrants in all the countries which have them. This attitude acts as an impediment to their sense of belonging, their rights as citizens and on various other issues.

But the migrant who has been forced to migrate on account of external factors (forced migration) never feel any sense of gain at all. For them, the sense of loss is a haunting factor. They may be able to make a new life in the country to which they had been forced to migrate. But, that does not compensate for the sense of loss that they feel about their material possessions and their sense of identity and belonging and in general a sense of freedom. Their adaption to the new life is always tinged with the sense of tragedy and loss and this affects their whole attitude to life.

So, migration of any type, voluntary or forced brings about a sense of displacement, a lack of sense of belonging. There are also dual loyalties—to the country of origin as well as to the country to which one has migrated. At times, it is not possible to keep a balance between the two which results in frustration, feeling of rootlessness etc. *Vastuhaara* (The Dispossessed) by late G. Aravindan is a Malayalam, film based on a short story with the same name, in the same language by C.V. Sreeraman. When Aravindan made it into a film



he did not completely veer away from Sreeraman's plot. He retained the outline and structure. All he did was adding new perceptions to suit the translation of the literary medium into a film medium. The existing structure was gently bent to elaborate or omit details to suit the film frame (space) and film time. The pattern that emerges is not very different from that of the short story, but there is an extension of the intensity of migration and the resultant dispossession in each frame, so that the haunting pathos of tragic loss lingers and heightens the emotional experience.

Aravindan develops the concept of "Dispossession" in many ways. This film is the combination of the two types of migrants described earlier. While Aarati Panikker, her daughter and son, like a thousand others who had to migrate at the time of partition from East

Bengal to West Bengal, became dispossessed through a political event, Venu, the hero, becomes dispossessed because of his journey from his village in Kerala to the town in search of a job and because of his mental separation from his mother, whose values were different from his; she was narrow minded and acquisitive and worried about money and landed property, while he looked upon the job not merely as a means of earning a livelihood or amassing money, but fulfilling the functions of the job namely the resettlement of refugees. The film is about the accidental meeting of the materially dispossessed with the emotionally dispossessed in Calcutta. Calcutta as a city has a great significance for both type of migrants. Being on the border of East and West Bengals, it has always seen many migrants and refugees. It's culture

*Vastubhara*





and milieu is that of a melting pot of Cultures. Venu's meeting with Aarati Panikker results in their realisation that they are related. Aarati's husband was Venu's uncle (mother's brother). Both felt an instinctive empathy towards each other and they began to try and build a new relationship. For Aarati and daughter. Venu was the link with a fragile past, a past connected with her husband's family; For Venu, this new family, poor, but proud gave a sense of belonging which his real family couldn't give.

For Aarti Panikker and her dead husband, the feeling of dispossession has started earlier, soon after their marriage, when their families disowned them. For both, a familiar world, a world with a life and people to whom they were close were lost. They had to start life all over again in a city, unfamiliar to them. Venu becomes the link between the two worlds, the lost world of the village, where an air of physical and emotional security lingers and the world of the city, where the harsh realities of living in confined spaces, the shroud of unemployment and poverty and the breaking-up of personal relationships are keenly felt. The village too is not a paradise. It is also a receptacle of the materialistic philosophy of the nouveau riche migrant; there is competition, greed, misery and loneliness which corrupts the human soul. Even the villagers lose their closeness to earth. Some people like Bhavani, Venu's aunt who was in love with the uncle who married Aarati, redeem themselves by fostering an emotion of love for the lost. Others grow hardened and cynical like Venu's mother. Migration and the ensuing material or emotional suffering redeems people like Venu, Aarati, her daughter Damayanti and her son; so they are able to reach out and forge new relationships and offer love and caring to their fellow beings.

Therefore, Vaastuhara in effect, depicts not only the pathos and tragedy of the migrant dispossessed, but deals with the redeeming features that come of such migrations. The homelessness, or lack of origins in itself softens the human heart and encourages it to seek love and a sense of belonging through new relationships. It is the migrant, who has left his moorings, who has an intense yearning to belong, to

care, to seek origins and preserve them. Those who are rooted in one place often tends to become, smug, complacent and rigid in their values. They do not want to break away from the comfort that status quo gives. So they do not progress either in their material or emotional lives. They remain fossilised in a time wrap. They do not want to share either their belongings or feelings with other human beings. They remain narrow minded and frustrated.

Apart from this, migration itself has a new meaning in modern life. Migration signifies change and change has not only become a way of life but the cardinal principle of modern life. The dialectic between homing and wandering instincts offer the creative urge to change and relocate. While the earlier generations taught us to value the eternal and unchanging qualities of life, modern life offers us the chance to seek and capture the adventure of change and sets before us the difficult task of retaining the fundamental and basic values even during the maelstrom of change. In a scenario of constant change, one does not take for granted the eternity of values or relationships. One learns to cherish the momentary glimpses of happiness to the full. As happiness is not automatically lasting, one learns to work towards it and recognise it from moment to moment. Happiness again is shifted to the sphere of individual effort rather than fate or other external factors. One could call migration the inspiration for risk taking, cultivating the ability to find out happiness by oneself and in general, dependence on oneself and one's inner qualities to face any crisis. It also helps to avoid seeking comfort and solace within narrow and confined borders and relationships. In fact, migration becomes a salutary factor than a tragic and discomforting aspect of life.

In Vaastuhara, Aravindan has introduced folk songs, folk tunes, idioms and folk celebrations such as the Durga Puja deliberately to depict the memories of the migrant dispossessed. The folk culture is reminiscent of a primeval past; a past which assumes the quality of eternity in the minds of the dispossessed. It is their link with the past, it is their only means to link with a common culture, heritage and even human



solidarity. It helps them to feel that they are not orphans, they have relations and relationships, they are not alone, but a part of the great humanity. There is friendship, camaraderie and fellow feeling during a festival such as Durga puja. It helps the migrant to feel a part of the whole and reaffirm their faith in the continuance of life. Durga Puja, thus acts as a metaphor in more than one way.

Durga Puja, is the story of Durga (goddess) visiting her parents from her in law's house. It is like the return of the one who has gone away to a new home to the heart of her old home or loved ones. Those who celebrate it are therefore reaffirming that all who go away (migrate) can return to a home or a hearth. At the end of the puja, there is the immersion of the idol of the Goddess in the ocean. This is not death, but the revival of life. It indicates only a temporary disappearance till next year. While it stress on the inevitability of separation it ends on a note of hope, a return to an abiding and eternal past. The film also ends in Venu getting on to the ship and moving away; at the last moment, Damayanti runs to him with the loud cry "Dada" and embraces him. She has found a brother and he a sister. So they have something, a relationship or someone, a relation to come back to, to cherish. A sense of belonging to something more than a lonely self is thus established.

The documentary strips added in *Vaastuhara* at the beginning and in the end of the film are not novel or extraordinary. But it gives a new dimension to the otherwise intensely human and tragic narrative. It elevates the film from the personal to the universal level and gives it a historic continuity. Migration is a historic factor and migration causes dispossession. This is at the same time tragic as well as consoling. The tragedy comes from loss; the redemption from the new life that is forged as a result of the tragedy. The tragedy, instead of weakening human resolve strengthens it. Migration is a symbol of human restlessness and desire for change. Sometimes it is voluntary; at other times forced. Whatever be the cause, after the initial dismay and sorrow, it results in a revival of a new life which may or may not retain the remnants of the past.

Whatever it is, it is a step forward and to that extent a salutary development.

*Vaastuhara* depicts the gloom of the post independent Calcutta relentlessly. The flat camera, the static rather than dynamic images all portray this relentless gloom and loneliness, loss of land, identity and soul. Many critics have commented on the lack of vitality in Sunny Joseph's camera work, but I tend to think that Aravindan wanted it that way; to capture the images in a flat, dead pan fashion, without any luminosity. Luminosity would be a hindrance in our perceiving the gloom that pervaded Calcutta, in the aftermath of partition and the Indo-Pakistan war. Luminosity in images would have been a hindrance to the honesty of purpose. So even the camera has been used to capture the tragedy of war, migration and refugees.

The redemption comes from the warmth of the relationship that develops between Aarati, Venu, and Damayanti. In fact the film again becomes a metaphor for the migrant's life and philosophy. The material situation, such as the surroundings, the living conditions, work situations cannot offer any consolation. They are in fact very bleak. But, in contrast, the human relations and emotional bondings flower and blossom and give the respite to the migrant. He is dispossessed in the material sense; but he is compensated through the richness in unexpected emotional responses. *Vaastuhara*, therefore becomes a true document showing the tragedy and the redemption of migration and dispossession.

### A Note to Contributors

Deep Focus welcomes well-researched articles, interviews, film and book reviews for publication and responses to articles published. The articles can be of any hue, of any persuasion, provided they are serious and thought-provoking. The manuscript should be neatly typed. Where possible and appropriate, please enclose film stills/photographs to illustrate the article.



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# Searching for a Place of their own:

Gonul Donmez interviews the  
Iranian Film Director Jaffer Panahi

By Gonul Donmez-Colin

**P**ost-revolutionary Iranian cinema has made its fame in the West with rural films involving children. In most of these highly allegorical stories, the child hero, often a boy, is challenged by various obstacles on his way to attain human values. Women are filmed in long shots, mostly in inconspicuous secondary roles.

Recent Iranian films that are lauded at international festivals or are commercially released in the West display a different picture as if the filmmakers are testing the relatively relaxed censorship codes to see how far they can push the limits. An adolescent girl runs away from home when she is reprimanded for speaking to her boy friend in the park in *Dokhtari Ba Kafsh-Haye-Katani* (The Girl In Sneakers, 1999) by Rassul Sadr-Ameli; a young woman shaves her head to be able to get a job in a weaving workshop in rural Iran and is subject to the attention of another young woman, in *Dakhtaran-e Khorsbid* (Daughters of the Sun, 2000) by Mariam Shahriar; another young woman faces divorce for participating in a bicycle race in *Rouzi Ke Zan Shoudam* (The Day I Became a Woman, 2000) by Marzieh Meshkini; homeless, single women who roam around Tehran at night risking several forms of abuse from catcalls to actual arrests, seek abortion, do 'favors' to men for money and even prostitute in *Dayareh*<sup>1</sup> (The Circle, 2000) by Jafar Panahi. The child heroes of the earlier films have grown up and their difficulties have become more complex. One may say that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has also reached maturity.

Jafar Panahi explored through the eyes of children the limitations and constraints enforced by society in his two previous award-winning films, *Badkonak-e sedif* (The White Balloon, 1995) and *Ayneth* (The Mirror (1997). His most recent film, *The Circle* exposes what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. The film begins at a maternity ward with the screams of a woman giving birth and ends in a detention camp where women huddled together whisper in the dark. Between these two dismally similar places of darkness and silent rage, linked to the world outside with a small window, young women run around in circles. Solmaz (which ironically



means a flower that does not fade) is bound to be rejected by her in-laws for giving birth to a girl. Nargess, the most vulnerable is desperate to return to her home in the countryside which she believes is depicted in a Van Gogh painting she comes across in the marketplace. Arezou who shelters her for a while, has more troubles of her own. Pari who has escaped from prison to have an abortion is rejected by her family and refused help by an

old friend, who feels that any connection with a prison inmate would reveal her secret past to her doctor husband and endanger her status as a respectable married woman. A single mother abandons her child in desperation and is arrested for soliciting when she gets into a man's car.

These women are denied the right to travel alone, to check into a hotel or to smoke in public. To exist, they have to be invisible. They are in constant state of panic, hiding behind cars, in dark alleys and under their chadors.



The cigarette becomes a metaphor for all the freedom that are denied to their sex. At the end when the prostitute dares her jailers—all men—and lights a cigarette on her way to prison, it is like a heroic declaration of freedom.

In addition to difficulties it has encountered with censorship, *The Circle* has been criticized by ordinary Iranians for not being true to life, or for depicting the issues of only a certain segment of society, namely the lower class women. Although Mr. Panahi admits that to accentuate the restrictions faced by women, he had to go into the poor districts of the southern part of Tehran and among a social class where limitations are more visible, he believes that whether you are privileged or not the laws are the same.

*The Circle* openly challenges the social system in a style more political than the previous two films of the director. Abortion, prostitution, family violence and abandonment of children are certainly not unique to Iranian society. But in the closed society depicted in the film, women get the blame and bear the burden.

This is also a new view of Tehran, from the perspective of the homeless and helpless women, which has not been so daringly explored before.

Panahi's view is not optimistic. At the end of *The Circle*, the girls go back to prison (except for Solmaz who is never seen in the film). "They have enlarged the circle, but they cannot come out of it," Panahi reiterates. "I don't know to what extent the fact that these girls run away or the fact that I make this film can change society. They may raise questions about the attitude, but to change the laws is much more difficult. Only history, time and social reforms that may and may not come will prove whether this film has had an impact." The following personal interview with Jafar Panahi took place during the Rotterdam International Film Festival, Jan 24 – Feb 3, 2001.

**Gonul Donmez-Colin:** *The Circle begins in a hospital and ends in a prison. These two places look very similar.*

Jafar Panahi: The first refers to coming to the world from a dark place and the second, going to a dark place.





**In the hospital, there is a small window to look inside and in prison, there is a small window to look outside.**

This is the form, the circle.

**The circle you draw is a vicious one.**

Absolutely. These women can enlarge the circle but not go out of it. You have noticed that each woman is named after a flower: Nargess, Meryem. The one who gives birth to a girl in the beginning is Solmaz—the one that is always fresh, that does not fade away. She is the one who cries—the one that is never destroyed. She is the one we do not see. At the end of the film, we understand that she also escaped from prison. In the last scene, the guards ask if she is there. She isn't. She escaped and did not return. The film begins with Solmaz and ends with her completing the circle.

**In addition to the small window, the two scenes are also connected with chilly colours and the immobile objects. Can you elaborate on this?**

I tried to adapt the form to the content of my film. The film starts with a scene that is all dark which is the birth and right after this scene, I have the white

scene when life starts. This is the beginning; I always wanted it have the colour to correspond to life so that the artistic content espouses the content and themes of the film.

**Following the hospital scene, the camera traces the older woman as she comes out and then moves to the three young women as if it is distracted for a moment and this is the first time we see them.**

I wanted to raise a question right in the beginning as to why there must be so much sadness when a girl is born. In the remaining 86 minutes of the film I talk about other restrictions these girls will face. Originally, I intended to begin the film with the guards naming the three girls coming out of the prison. However, fifteen days before shooting the film, I had doubts about that scene. Then I remembered an incident: When I was a student, the day I was presenting my theses, my wife gave birth. I ran to the hospital and found out she had a daughter. The first woman I saw was my mother. She said, "Jafar, don't worry, it is not a shame, but you have a daughter." I said, "Why should I be disappointed?" I found out that even my mother



wanted me to have a son despite the fact that I already had a son. The moment of birth is the moment that establishes the difficulties of a woman's life; it symbolizes it. That is why I decided to begin with that moment instead of naming the girls going out of prison.

**How do you respond to comments by some Iranians that your film does not draw a real picture of Iran, or that the difficulties encountered by the women in your film apply only to a certain class of women?**

It is true that the film is shot in the southern areas of Tehran which is today poorer. However, whether you are more privileged or under privileged, the laws are the same. Any woman under eighteen from any class cannot travel alone or check into a hotel by herself. The laws apply to all although some may escape it. It is true that perhaps I focused on the more underprivileged, but this was what I was interested in. **There are several other countries where a young girl cannot check into a hotel by herself.**

But there is no law against it. It is true that limitations exist everywhere. We all live within a circle of constraints, whether it is smaller or larger depends on the situation or the time. There are also examples from Europe where women cannot wear a veil. There were demonstrations in France on this issue. I focus on restrictions in Iran, but I consider that these vicious circles are everywhere. It is plus or minus relative.

**Women in Iran seem to be changing the rules in the last few years. We have seen a film, *The Girl in Sneakers* about a teenager who runs away from home. According to an article published in New York Times, many girls are running away from their repressive homes.**

I do not know to what extent the fact that these girls run away or the fact that I make this film can change the society. They may question the attitude, but to change the laws is much more difficult. Only history, time, social reforms that may or may not come will prove whether there has been an impact.

**Why is it that recently we see more films about women's issues coming from Iran?**

Each year 60-70 films are produced in Iran. Among these, there are films about women's issues. Because these are commercial films that lack artistic merit, they do not draw as much attention. They treat a social problem, as it has always been treated before and after the revolution. But in terms of aesthetics and artistic approach, they are different. The discrimination comes from the quality of the films rather than the subject matter.

**Just the same, recently we have seen several Iranian films on women's issues and particularly by women directors, *Two women*, *Daughters of the sun*, *The day I Became a Woman*, to name a few.**

Rakhshan Bani Etemad and Tahmine Milani<sup>2</sup> are from a generation—the older generation—that has always concerned itself with women's issues. They haven't really changed; they just make better films and we see more of them. The new generation are new and have a better exposure. I don't think the theme was not tackled. For instance, Bahram Bayzai has been making films about women for the last 30 years. Most of the thematic films of Mehrjui are about women. In my first film, I worked with children and young people but I began to think of the limitations facing these girls once they grow up. In order to visualize these limitations, I went to a social class, which has more limitations so that this idea could come out even stronger. To have this constraint seen better visually, I went to areas that are more underprivileged.

It is very difficult to generalize. Someone like Kiarostami never did a film about women and he still does not want to do. There isn't really a big trend about women's issues; it just happened that more established women directors are more established now and the young ones come and tackle issues nearer to them.

**You mean it does not have something to do with the election of moderate Mohammad Khatami and the relaxation of laws?**

It could be, but this is one of the many reasons. Evidently, under a more open regime, people who have thought they could not tackle certain subjects, dare a



bit more. The fact that they think they have more freedom entices them, but this is one reason among many.

**Can we find a thread running through *The White Balloon*, *The Mirror* and *The Circle*?**

My first film was an exercise for me. I did all the studies, I acquired some expertise and I wanted to put it all in practice. To apply what I learned and learn from it—one step towards a better learning. I consider *The Mirror*, my second film an experiment. With that film, I tried to break my style and move into a different style, which was the preliminary work for *The Circle*. Finally, *The Circle*, is more representative of what I have wanted to do in form and style. In all my films, I am concerned with social issues. In my first film, I lowered my level to a child's level and through the eyes of a child, explored how a child would perceive limitations and constraints and cope with them. But the characters grew up; their difficulties are now more sophisticated. Their vision and experiences require a more acute and precise perspective. What are the real issues? It all starts with a more innocent, sweet and soft look at life and may become more bitter as time goes by.

As I was gradually becoming interested in more acute social problems, I wanted to get away from a child's view—from the primary concerns only—to more complex issues and stronger statements. Therefore, the characters grow older as the films go.

**The fascination with the streets of Tehran is in all of them.**

My knowledge of the city comes forty years of experiencing it, I observe all the details and everything from a raindrop to a ray of sunshine is very close to me. I try to capture what I know and live on a daily basis.

**I must admit I never understood why your first film was called "The White Balloon" when it was about a red fish!**

I choose my titles not symbolically but in reference to the other. I wanted people to think why I chose this title. Question the title. Very early on in the film, I give a blue balloon to the child. The film starts with a blue balloon but after it is about a girl who is concerned

about her fish and many people think there must be a mistake in the way the title is translated. My concern was not so much with the linear story of the girl to buy her fish but all her encounters with different people during the film. In reality, when I say 'The white balloon,' somebody, an unknown man is my main subject—the one you see only a second, the anonymous person on the street.

**He is an Afghan refugee.**

He is carrying the white balloon the way a white peace flag is carried. He also wants to have a place of his own in the world. In that film alone, I have people from ten different regions. It does not matter whether they are from Azerbaijan or Afghanistan. My vision about them is human but I also want to show the diversity of the human face. How diverse they can be but still all of them is one human being.

**In the future, is there going to be a film about the closed circle of the old age, as you get older yourself?**

I don't know what will be the next human subject that will attract me, but I have no objection to what seduces me as a human subject. May be I should also grow up, learn more languages, have more words around me, travel more. Then other subjects would pop up. It is nice to go to different places and meet new people. Learning one more language to communicate more, to learn more. When you go to a city park and watch old people telling their stories, this might be an interesting subject. Whenever there is some human emotion that can be universal, I am interested.

**Notes :**

1. *Dayareh* (the Circle) won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, 2000.
2. Tahmine Milani who is a radical critic of the status of women in Iran had to wait eight years before the script for *Do Zan* (Two Women, 1998) could be approved. Produced during Mohammad Khatami's presidency, it drew over three million viewers in Iran despite the fact that any advertisement of the film on television was banned. *Two Women* depicts the lives of urban middle class Iranians from the perspective of a woman. The film is very pertinent when it comes to socio-economical circumstances that block women's attempts at independence.



*Dear readers, we in the editorial thought it befitting to share an Open Letter circulated by Mr. Panahi regarding the inhuman treatment he faced in New York on his way to attend Film Festivals in Montevideo and Buenos Aires as an appendix to his interview. We acknowledge and thank ifson.org for publishing his letter on the website as well as giving us permission to print it.*

## **Open letter from Iranian Filmmaker**

The following is the text of an open letter written by Jafar Panahi, the Iranian filmmaker, whose film *The Circle* had won the last Venice Festival, and addressed to his US colleagues who awarded him the Freedom of Expression Prize.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the winner of the Freedom of Expression Award for my film, *The Circle*, I would like to take your kind attention to what happened to me in your country, an incident that takes place everyday in US. And let me hope to see your reaction to these inhuman incidents. I believe, I am entitled to be curious about the response of the Board who granted me such Award, a response proportionate to the behavior I and many other people faced and will face.

You have considered my movie as a "wonderful and daring" film and I wish your Board and the US media would dare to condemn the savage acts of American Police/Immigration Officers and may such condemnation would make the people aware of these acts. Otherwise, what would mean winning such Award for me? And what honor I would have to keep it? Then, I may return this Award to you as you may find another figure that is more in proportionate to freedom!

In the booklet you kindly sent me together with your Award, I read that a prestigious film personality like Orson Welles has already received this Award. Should I be happy that this great man is not among us now to hear how the American police behaves to the filmmaker or people who enter your country? As a filmmaker obsessed with social issues, my films deal with social problems and limits and naturally I cannot be indifferent to racist, violent, insulting and inhuman acts in any place in the world. However, I certainly do

detach the acts of American police and politicians from the cultural institutions and figures as well as from the people of USA —as I was informed, the film critics and audiences in your country very well received my film. Nevertheless, I will inform the world media about my unpleasant experience in New York and I hope, your Board, who strives in freedom of expression, would react properly in this respect.

On April 15, I left Hong Kong Film Festival to the Montevideo and Buenos Aires Festivals through United Airlines' flight 820. **This 30-hours trip was via New York JFK airport and I had to stay there for two hours and change my flight to Montevideo.** Further to my requests, the staff of all the said Festivals had already checked if a transit visa is required and they assured me there is no need for such via and moreover, the airliner issued me the ticket visa NY. But, I myself did ask the United Airlines staff for the need for a transit visa at Hong Kong airport and I heard the same response.

As soon as I arrived at JFK airport, the American police took me to an office and they asked for finger-printing and the photography because of my nationality. I refused to do it and I showed them my invitations of the Festivals. They threatened to put me in the jail if I would not do the finger-printing. I asked for an interpreter and to call. They refused. Then they chained me like the medieval prisoners and put me in a police patrol and took me to another part of the airport. There were many people, women and men from different countries. They passed me to new police men. They chained my feet and locked my chain to the others, all locked to a very dirty bench. For 10 hours, no questions and answers, I was forced to sit on that bench, pressed to the others. I could not move. I was suffering from an old illness, however, nobody noticed. Again, I requested them to let me call someone in New York, but they refused. They not only ignored my request but also the request of a boy from Sri Lanka who wanted to call his mom. Everybody was moved by the crying of the boy, people from Mexico, Peru, Eastern Europe, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and... I was thinking that any country has its own law but I could not just understand those inhuman acts.



At last, I saw the next morning. Another police man came to me and said that they have to take my photograph. I said never. And I showed them my personal photos. They said no and that they have to take my photo (in the way the criminals are taken) and to do the finger-printing. I refused. An hour later, two other guys came to me and threatened me to do the finger-printing and photography by computer and again I refused and I asked for a phone. At last, they accepted and I could call Dr. Jamsheed Akrami, the Iranian film professor of Columbia University, and I explained to him the whole story. I requested him to convince them and as he knows me well, I am not a guy to do what they were looking for.

Two hours later, a police man came to me and took my personal photo. They chained me again and took me to a plane, a plane that was going back to Hong Kong.

*In the plane and from my window, I could see New York. I knew my film, The Circle, was released there for two days and I was told the film was very well received too. However, the audiences would understand my film better if they could know that the director of the film was chained at the same time. They would accept my beliefs that the circles of human limits do exist in any part of this world but with different ratios.*

*I saw the Statue of Liberty in the waters and I unconsciously smiled. I tried to draw the curtain and there were scars of the chain on my hand. I could not stand the other travellers gazing at me and I just wanted to stand up and cry that I'm not a thief! I'm not a murderer! I'm not a drug dealer! I ... am just an Iranian, a filmmaker. But how I could tell this, in what language? In Chinese, Japanese or to the mother tongues of those people from Mexico, Peru, Russia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh... or in the language of that young boy from Sri Lanka? Really, in what language?*

I had not slept for 16 hours and I had to spend another 15 hours on my way back to Hong Kong. It was just a torture among all these watching eyes. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. But I could not. I could just see the images of those sleepless women and men who were still chained.

**Jafar Panahi**

## Response to "Open Letter"

ifson.org

News - May 2001

Last month we carried the Open Letter from Iranian Filmmaker, Jafar Panahi, to his colleagues in US where he recounted his experiences at the hands of the US immigration officials. The response to this piece in our site has been overwhelming.

In deference to the keen interest the readers have taken on this issue, we give below two letters received by us from US-based people associated with filmmaking and film production.

My dear friends,

Most of you know that I was brutalized, slandered, wrongly imprisoned and charged by the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) and the Highway Patrol (in cahoots) in Los Angeles and that was the main reason I left LA, etc... While the right to do so was posted all over the walls, I was threatened with being turned in to the INS. I was never allowed to see a doctor, even after asking inmates to finally make a phone call, that took a while, believe me...

When I finally made it, four days later, I tried to get help from the civil rights groups and the lawyers who take civil rights cases, but my situation wasn't "serious" enough. To put it simply, I wasn't hurt enough, no (physical) bones were broken. They have so many of these cases, only the "big" ones get some attention and resolutuion, if any. So unless you are a millionaire, you are words and actions...

I know not all cops or inmigration officers, et al are "bad" or power crazed. I've met many who are wholesome, extremely helpful and true. They are also indispensable, but my thoughts at that time, and now, are that it is as if there were two parallel realities, and laws, existing in the US. One for the mainstream, mostly white, citizens and another for way too many different sectors of society (I'm not even going into the socio-economic, race, problem with the justice system, since that's all over the papers these days, with all kinds of studies being conducted); the second one affecting immigrants in way too many instances. Also, the INS is very hard to monitor... Does anyone doubt immigrants are treated badly, many times criminally so?



A German friend of mine was once intimidated at JFK (airport) by a homosexual INS officer who knew he could get away with it! We had a big laugh about it, but the truth is that if my friend hadn't been very resourceful and calm, used to all kinds of stress and difficult situations due to a job that takes him all over the world, this would have been quite tragic...

I know of too many first stories, and I'm not even looking for them, yet. This is an awful, ironical state of affairs, isn't it? Since almost everyone here — unless you are Native American—is an immigrant or descends from one that came here only a "few" years ago...

One day, I hope to raise enough money to make a film about this. Meanwhile, what I'm asking from you, as my friends and aware people, is to read this letter from a foreign fellow filmmaker, because awareness is the first step to change a situation. While the fascist Franco was alive in Spain, and I remember this first hand, people were afraid of the police, and the government was feared as well, even at the end of his life. With the new democracy, one of the first steps that were taken, was to change the modus operandi of the police, military and other national forces. It became possible, and was done often, to punish any and all abuse of authority. Today, people do not fear their security mechanisms and can trust that they are in place to do what they were set up for: to protect and serve them. This is not the case in this country. So I believe if that we ever have an opportunity, however small, to help this state of affairs in any way, we need to; and I know you will.

Thank you!  
VV

Dear Sir or Madam

I am writing this email in regards to the story about Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi and his experiences he had with the American Police and Immigration service. This is not a new problem and has stereotyped and profiled as a possible "terrorist" and "enemy of the United States". This type of thing has happened to many people I know, including one of my close friends. I would appreciate if you can forward this email to Mr. Panahi, because I have been wanting to get help to

create a short film on exactly this type of incident, and any information and advice he can share will be greatly helpful to us. We are a Muslim-owned video and film production company in the S.F. Bay Area, and we create films that deals with stories about our people and religion. We want to help dispel these negative images and stereotypes which are prevalent in the mainstream American (and western) media, and hope that our work will help to end (or at least start to reduce) these types of incidents and problems which occur in America due to lack of education and ignorance about the different cultures, religions and peoples of the world.

Thanks for your time.

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### **Press Conference & Press Release by Bangalore Film Society**

We are extremely pained and shocked to read the open letter from Jafar Panahi, film director from Iran, recipient of the Freedom of Expression Award for his film *The Circle*, from US. We condemn the inhuman treatment meted out to him and the people from the third world he mentions in his letter by the US police and the immigration officers. As he rightly pointed out in his letter that this is something that happens everyday to the immigrants from the third world for various reasons and can happen in the future as well. It is not often that we hear the voices of protest. Many suffer the humiliation in silence. We from Bangalore Film Society request the media (news papers and T.V.) national and international, the international Film Festivals, the film fraternity, the governments of the third world and concerned citizens for an apology from the US police and the immigration department of the US and obtain an assurance that citizens from other nations will be treated with due regard.

Incidentally, this is the decade of human rights declared by the United Nations for human rights education among the world citizens. On this occasion we request you to kindly publish our protest along with the open letter of Mr. Jafar Panahi enclosed herewith.

**Girish Kasaravalli**

Film Director - Karnataka.

(This letter was published in Bangalore based English and Kannada dailies on 5th May 2001).

# Media Commentary:

Reflections on some methodological questions  
with reference to Manichitrathazhu

R. Nandakumar



There is currently a joke in Malayalam that writings in the Malayalam press about popular films under the label of media studies or culture studies, are more popular than popular films themselves. In fact, it is a continuation of the earlier 'progressive' film criticism of the sixties and early seventies that expressed a kind of moral outrage at the 'vulgarity' and 'depravity' of films (that is, films in general, any film whatsoever). And it all boils down to complaints about some actor having a chubby face and puffy cheeks in his embodiment of perennial youthfulness or some actress flaunting her good looks quite seductively, casting an 'evil' spell on young minds, and so on. Everybody those days agreed that film was morally repugnant and by common consent was the worst social offender. The problem was that the film 'showed' young men and women walking



together, holding each other's hands, exchanging amorous glances, doing some harmless billing and cooing (not yet kissing, as the farthest that they can go was short of kissing), and so on. In other words, it showed man and woman *in love*, which was the worst offence to feminine modesty and decorum as defined by the institutional practices of man-woman relation—in a society in which avoiding eye-contact between man and woman in public (especially, for the woman who has to pretend in public that she is neither seeing nor is being seen by man who is all but the representation of one collective social phallus) is a carefully observed body language of civil decorum. Think of it, in such a rigidly inhibited society the film offered a behavioural code for people to fall in love, as it were. Not that stories about lovelorn damsels in distress that were no less slushy and soapy, were unfamiliar in literature—particularly in the serialized version of the pulp variety. But unlike film, literature is fiction, all the same, and is at one remove from the real. Cinema is out there for you to see and has an immediacy of appeal that makes it a kind of virtual second-reality, prompting people to seek parallels for the characters and situations outside the film in real life; and the presuppositions, expectations and anticipations that are brought to bear on the spectation call upon such unconscious parallelisms to complete the illusion of verisimilitude, which decides the nature of the media experience—for both the unpretentious fan and the pretentious high brow.

With the advent of the new cinema in Malayalam in the early seventies, this kind of lamenting the 'decline of moral values' caused by films fed into the rather new discourse of film criticism with an added cultural investment. If earlier the films were derided for their lack of probability or convincing realism, the very same were renegotiated to make a case against their lack of what is now considered 'artistic' worth. Now, when these films were subjected to the norm of 'art', the ordinary, routine films got themselves branded as 'commercial', for the first time. As 'art' and 'commerce' were considered mutually exclusive categories, pitted one against the other, it also offered the convenient gloss for 'art' film such that it lent itself to a production

strategy whereby 'art' is arrived at through a style of exclusion.

The common ground that the Malayalam new cinema shared with the modernist concepts that were primarily literary in orientation, was that esoteric ideal of 'art'. The attitude of the modernist institutions that the 'art' in films has to be assessed in terms of the elitist distance of aesthetic closure that modernity should maintain with the popular mass media like films, has already got the official approval of the culture bureaucracy. And the 'evil' of 'commercial' cinema has become an accepted truth by consensual validation. It is no less important to note that the kind of provincial modernism in Malayalam, for that matter, was institutionalized through the discourses of the topical, or of co(n)temporaneity that the culture industry was keeping live to cater to the literate-media sensibility that sustained it; and conversely, the brand of literary journalism that sustained modernist institutions was itself a conduit for it. The 'art' of world films from different countries and of different periods that the film enthusiasts went into raptures over at film society screenings, attested to the highfalutin 'spiritual loftiness' of some absolutistic, suprapersonal ideal construed as existential truth that was thematised at the interface between the discourses of modernism and co(n)temporaneity. At the same time, the 'vulgarity' of the commercial film came in handy to be posited as the natural foil to the 'spiritual loftiness' of its arty counterpart. In this new hierarchy, commercial cinema as the lowbrow villain became the worst social offender who is single-handedly responsible for all the social evils and is the antagonist of virtue, that is, of the 'art' cinema. In the agenda of the culture industry that operates from the borderline of the art/commerce divide this categorization is of much importance. The so-called progressive attitudes of professional cinema journalism with its compulsive self-righteous moralism, does not do anything so much as recycle the logic of this divide of the culture industry. But why this moralism should turn against an actor's youthfulness or deplore an actress' good looks is a question that we cannot address in this paper, though it is of great significance. What this brand of cinema journalism has recourse to is a set of popular



assumptions and common sense notions that are vindicated by public attitudes of progressivism and that have their roots in the observations of early film theorists which in turn, made the most of the magical nature of the media experience and its exaggerated influence on the spectators. Such early observations that harped on the media-specific attributes of the influence on spectator-responses have their unseen reference points in the European sociological thought of the late nineteenth century. By being absorbed into American media commentary they have assumed the culture-neutral universality of appeal of some critical meta-theory. Cinema found its place in both the sociological thought and in media commentary as a case in point that vindicated the fears about the corrupting influence of the new forms of the mass media that the individual is exposed to. Even so, this was taken by the film theorists to lend credence to the view about the extraordinary powers of the medium that are unheard of in the case of the traditional forms of art. Joli Jenson shows how the attitude of the American media criticism towards the mass media—including comics, jazz, advertisements, cinema and television—was formed within the connotations of the construct of modernity as evolved in the historical context of the Euro-American thought, especially as an extension of the mass society theory of the late nineteenth century. Jenson argues that the media commentary proceeds at solely a narrative level as a general discourse that mobilizes and reproduces assumptions about history, culture, society and technology and as such takes on the characteristics of myth, legend and folk tale. “Disturbing ‘evidence’ of media influence mingles with more evanescent claims about the commercialization of art and politics and the fragmenting of contemporary consciousness”. She notes further on that “modernity is predominantly conceptualized as a destructive outside influence—it is something that ‘happens to’ an ongoing situation. *This notion of outside influence is also the central theme of the story of media influence*”<sup>1</sup>. [emphasis added]

Though the historical specifics of the socio-cultural circumstances and the ideological underpinnings that go into the making of the construct of modernity may

differ, the tendency to link modernity and media in an unstated equation has its parallel elsewhere outside the European context, too. Thus the practice, as Jenson says, that by taking on ‘the media’, criticism can address the abstract construct ‘modernity’ via a stand-in, holds equally true of many cultures though the content and the experience of modernity change from one society to another. What is of interest is to note how, on the one hand, problematic areas of social experience in situations of structural conflict assume their devious and dissimulated forms of expression in popular cinema and what are the social solvents operative in the denouement by way of the ‘poetic justice’—the vicarious terms of resolution. On the other, we have also to note what are the areas that the media commentary, when it ‘takes on’ the popular cinema, drives at for particular criticism which has to be recognized more from its tone, tenor and temperament than understood from its content. Interestingly, we realize that both the media commentary and the popular cinema share a point of convergence in their concerns and that the former criticizes the latter for expressing its own fears that it always wanted not to recognize. Or rather, for expressing what it was always afraid of about itself, lest what it fears should betray it, once expressed. It is not without reason that almost all media commentary in Malayalam invariably assumes that unmistakably ‘radical’ tone of condemning and deploring the popular, the mass, the commercial and the corrupting cinema of the routine run— perfectly in tune with the familiar and unproblematic public rhetoric of radicalism. But the tone of self-righteous moralism with its obsessively overstated negations and denouncements beneath the apparent radicalism tells it all as to the exact nature of the unconscious fears and anxieties that the media commentary as a general discourse expresses.

As Ashish Rajadhyaksha notes, one of the two contradictory concepts of the spectator that is fundamental to the Indian cinema is of “the invisible spectator, an ‘empty and absent subject, reduced to the mere faculty of vision’ (Christian Metz) which in turn allows the scene to ignore that it is seen and the viewer thereby uses that ignorance to ignore him/herself as



voyeur"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, a spectatorship that shies away from the recognition that it is itself to be a voyeur, is an ideological construct of our filmic conventions. On the part of the spectator who has to be a voyeur in practically all his/her social roles, such a spectatorship not only confirms it but also helps to ignore his/her helplessness in coming to terms with it as natural. At the same time, it evolves a personality structure that has unconsciously displaced its own subjecthood from the process of seeing. What is to be noted is that such a spectatorhood is crucial in deciding the nature of the process of seeing the cinema, in forming the responses to what is seen and in the individual psychology of what is generally called identification. It is when the ambivalences and contradictions inherent in this response are subject to certain media-specific distortions and manipulations that we see the use of technique and convention as ideology.

As an example we can see how the star system that is a product of the institutionalization of cinema as industry, generates and nurtures a particular kind of such a response. Watching a star of the same gender in the role of a common man's character representing the spectator's own class, it is with an unconscious relief that the latter acknowledges to him/herself how great the star personality is as against the type being impersonated and hence, by extension, the spectator him/herself. Having to see much of him/herself in the character so as not to want to identify with it, it is the extra dimension of stardom that is brought to bear upon the character that becomes a solace for the spectator in his/her inability to believe in him/herself and in this sense, is a little like the ideal ego in Lacanian terms. In the state of exalted identification with the star portraying the like of the viewer's own life, the viewer projects his/her own ideal ego on to the screen performance and is caught in an unconscious alternation between euphoria and self-pity, as his/her auto- and allo-identifications alternate at the interface of the mismatch between character vis-a-vis the star.<sup>3</sup> When the motivations of this individual psychology are presupposed in the media experience itself (that is, in the irreconcilable nature of the contradiction in the viewer's response), it is by playing up and reinforcing

such aspects of the media experience that it assumes the macro-structure of a cinematic convention like, for example, the earlier practice of the double-role. By lending itself to identify with separately in terms of the alternation between good and evil (that is, to identify and not to identify through an alternating process of aspectual othering), it has come into practice as a cinematic convention that exploits the aforesaid viewer psychology at the individual level. Or, to take another example of a cinematic convention that is operative within a similar psychological frame of alternating projections of selective identification, we can look at the picturisation of the cabaret sequences as discussed by Madan Gopal Singh<sup>4</sup>. Right at the start, no time is lost in establishing through the shots of the villain that it is the villain who is seeing the cabaret. Even as the male viewer identifies vicariously with it he seeks refuge in the alibi that it is the villain and not he who sees it, which is rendered natural by habit derived from the media-specific structure of seeing. Thus he becomes the voyeur of a voyeur. It also offers him an alibi for feeling assured that he is twice removed from the act of identificatory spectation. Here, as he is seeing the cabaret through the angle of the villain he is unconsciously displaced from the position of the subject of the act of voyeuristic identification with it. What absolves him from the guilt of watching the naked female body on the sly is the assurance that there is the other as a stand-in to whom it can be attributed. Such sequences become concrete visual metaphors of the individual psychology that negates whatever one actually is by projecting it on to others (in the Freudian sense of negative projection) and thus absolving oneself of that which one actually is, but does not want to admit to oneself.

A step away is the hollow self-righteous moralism. For the viewer who self-righteously believes that it is not he who sees the cabaret but only the villain, it becomes easy to vindicate himself by joining the public rhetoric of popular moralism that the whole society is made up of this kind of villains who are the representatives of evil. In a sense, this is how such sequences become a visual metaphor for the social



macro-structure of all moralism. For, when he repeats<sup>7</sup> the general 'truth' that 'the whole world is filled with evil', he as the speaker of the 'truth' is privileged to be not bound by the 'truth' as it places him securely outside the range of its implications. In any case, cinema takes its place in popular assumptions as synonymous with the 'badness' of its external influence characteristic of modernity. It is herein that the tone of moral condemnation that is repeatedly heard in the 'radical' brand of popular cinema journalism becomes suspect.

## 2

This paper proposes to arrive at a critical perspective that would allow to look at the phenomenon of popular cinema against its cultural location. The film taken up for discussion here is *Manichitrathazhu* (Malayalam, 1993, directed by Fazil), which was a major commercial success and at the same time, won several awards including that for the "best Malayalam film with aesthetic quality and popular appeal" and fetched the national award for the best actress for its lead female role. The film, after all these years, still enjoys wide popularity and a certain artistic status among the elite viewers of popular cinema. The narrative of the film is briefly outlined here.

Madampally Meda is the typical large, sprawling ancestral home in the tradition of the erstwhile matrilineal joint family. At the beginning of the film we see that though well-kept, the house is not occupied by any one and we are given to understand that it is a haunted house. The family stays in another house nearby. Nakulan who belongs to the younger generation of the family and his newly wed wife, Ganga, are coming home from Calcutta obviously for the first time after their marriage. As they reach quite late in the night, they decide to sleep in the vacant Madampally Meda so as not to disturb others in the family.

Coming to know of this the next morning, it creates quite a flutter in the family and everyone is scared of the consequences. To make matters worse, Ganga and Nakulan decide to live in the forbidden house during their stay, ignoring all warnings. As they settle down in the house, Ganga finds it particularly fascinating and spends much of her time there. She is in good company

with Sreedevi and another young girl, both cousins of Nakulan. They take her around the house and help her settle in one of the rooms. Ganga gets curious about the mystery that surrounds another room which nobody opens as it is forbidden from doing so. She manages to open it with the help of the younger girl, to the utter consternation of everyone. The bewildered *karanavan* of the family thinks of some possible rituals in expiation of the sacrilege. In the meantime, Ganga gets to know more about the room and the fables that surround it.

According to family annals, Nagavally, a graceful dancer, was a Tamil woman who was patronized by one *karanavan*,<sup>5</sup> the mighty overlord of the matrilineal joint family in the olden times. She was killed by the *karanavan* whose word was law, for her infidelity when she was found to be in love with a man living nearby. Her spirit is ritually confined within the room lest it should take revenge and bring doom on the family.

Gradually, unnatural happenings that bode ill for the family occur. When everybody is panicked, Ganga and Nakulan try to brush it aside as superstition. At this point, an old friend of Nakulan, Dr. Sunny, visits them for a sojourn in their family. As we learn in the course of the film, he is a very eminent psychoanalyst who has come with a very specific mission. His bag catches fire mysteriously. Glasses and dishes are broken. Sreedevi shows signs of being mentally unstable. Everyone believes that these forebodings are caused by the avenging spirit of Nagavally who is at large. Ganga is seen the least perturbed amidst all this. The present *karanavan* of the family consults the great *vedic* scholar, Brahmadathan Namboodiripad, and arranges for elaborate sacramental rituals to exorcise the spirit of Nagavally.

Dr. Sunny who has been observing Ganga all along, realizes that all the supposedly ill omens are in fact her handiwork which she does unconsciously, to the notice of none. She has identified with Nagavally and is re-enacting her past life quite unconsciously. He discusses the matter with Namboodiripad and they agree that Ganga is suffering from acute schizophrenia and that she has a dual personality. The therapy takes an interesting turn in which the psychoanalyst and the *vedic*



scholar join hands. In a final stage-managed performance, involving the high theatricality of sacramental rituals used as a ploy, Ganga is feverishly worked up in her identification with Nagavally. Namboodiripad, the *vedic* priest, invokes and addresses the spirit of Nagavally and orders it to leave the body of Ganga which it refuses. He offers to help it in fulfilling its revenge if it agrees to leave. Nagavally wants to take revenge by killing the *karanavan*. Accordingly, Nakulan is made to lie down on a sliding trolley and it is moved towards Ganga who is in a trance. As soon as she gets a glimpse of Nakulan and comes forward, sword in hand, Nakulan gets off in a jiffy and is replaced by a dummy resembling a *karanavan*. In a frenzy, she hacks down the dummy violently and slumps down unconscious and exhausted. Next, we see Dr. Sunny waking her up from the hypnotic sleep and asking her who she is. To which she answers 'Ganga', and when asked to say it in full, says: 'Ganga Nakulan'. Cured of her illness, she recovers her former self and joins Nakulan.

What comes up for easy recognition in the film as an ambient presence on the narrative level is a theme of what it claims to be a reconciliation of tradition and modernity. Within the narrative strategies of this theme of 'reconciliation', one has to look into how the signifiers of tradition and modernity produce their culture-specific meaning-representations and how the theme is encoded in its discursive structures.

The *signifiers* of tradition and modernity that the film takes recourse to, unmistakably clichés that they are, are used in the *theme* of their reconciliation which itself is a pastiche, *narrated* in a style that has more than a touch of parody about it. To extend an argument of Kajri Jain, we have to note that these meaning-representations, situated as they are within a constantly changing postcolonial everyday, are subject to inflections that cannot be read off as tradition and modernity<sup>6</sup>. These signifiers themselves were the cultural referents of a premodern problematique as they were defined in a colonial situation of structural conflict. The candid



and the least apologetic use of these once meaningful signifiers in their present banal redundancies is itself symptomatic of a practice that is meant to be taken as an *inflection* of past meanings; and the affirmation of tradition as the haven of good old virtue in the film is knowingly half-hearted and carries little conviction.

“Created/expelled as byproducts in the continuing process of modernity’s hegemonic (re)organization of time and space, the everyday and the post/colonial are sites both of modernity and of its simultaneous critique”<sup>7</sup>. The postcolonial everyday as the site both of modernity and its negation entails an equivocation between a defence and an apology—*defence* of what it is, as *apology* for what it is not. The mode of being what one is *not* as the mode of *not being what one is*, facilitates an alternation and drift (as slippage from the unconscious) between the two that is characteristic of a moral ambivalence and cultural schizophrenia as inscribed in the ‘radical syndrome’ of the Malayali social psyche; this is recycled all too readily by the cinematic conventions described earlier that reinforce the alienating identifications in which the spectator takes refuge. In a sense, this may be the defence against the self-pity and moral anxiety engendered by the failing ideal of a partially achieved modernity, in terms of a self-image that invokes tradition as *the* defence.

In the film *Manichitrathazhu*, as we note how the signifiers of tradition and modernity engage the narrative plane and how they produce their signification in the discursive field of the cinema, we realize they are innocuous cultural ready-mades used for the routine thematic resolution. That said, we will find as we get along that the resolution is not innocuous in itself. By using the signifiers of tradition and modernity in their clichéd forms in the least apologetic or pretentious way, their banality is turned in upon themselves to become the logic of their own use. When the film gives expression to the concerns about tradition and modernity centred around the main character of Ganga, it is those very concerns that are subjected to the logic of parody within the narrative strategies of the film. When the contradictions implied in these apparent concerns about tradition and modernity are resolved

on the narrative plane in line with the convention of wishful denouement, the actual contradictions that the film tacitly keeps away from our consciousness (in the Freudian sense of repression) are those implied in the deeper concerns of the Kerala society about womanhood. It is to dissimulate the contradictions implied in the latter concerns and to be offered as a surrogate for them that the motif of resolution of the more explicit and ideologically more facile contradictions of the former concerns are foregrounded by the film. While the motif of resolution knowingly remains on the level of cliché, it is the logic of parody, of the mimicry of genuineness, which renders the facile equations of the cliché operative within a system of cinematic signification that is validated by convention. The operative logic of the cliché itself is something that squares with the many narrative conventions of the popular cinema—like, comic relief, melodrama, improbability, the superhuman powers that accrue as a natural attribute of stardom and so on, which are the tricks of the trade of the institution of cinema as industry. Within this discourse, it is the ‘poetic justice’ demanded by the narrative structure and the denouement that renders the motif of resolution natural—marriage, home coming of the long lost, reunion of the separated or missing, repentance on clearing the misunderstanding and so on.

I saw the film *Manichitrathazhu* in a video copy. All along, commercial spots and ads keep coming on and off, not marked by any visual separation, finding their place within the respective frame itself and at times, presented by the actors and actresses who form the cast of the film. Of course, the film was not made in this way. But the director or the producer, when he sold the video rights, might not have found anything inherently incompatible with the idea of his film circulating in such a way. Thus the film has become in the length of its visual body, in its footage itself, a pastiche in a profilmic way (in Metz’s sense). Even as the philosophy of the pastiche that the film has appropriated for itself, is recycled and reinforced through many narrative strategies and tricks of the trade for which it becomes the rationale, it also conflates the ‘low’ humour and ‘high’



thought on the same plane— rendering any qualitative value judgment impossible. For example, the saffron-clad character played by Mohanlal early in the film with all his antics, and acting-dumb before he reveals himself to be the psychoanalyst/his serious discussion on psychoanalysis later; the crude and primitivist black magic of the lower-cast attendant, Kattuparampan/the solemn and sanctimonious priestly rituals of Brahmadathan Namboodiripad. Or, take the case of Madampally Meda, the ancestral joint family which is of crucial thematic significance to the whole film. By no stretch of imagination can one discount the high improbability factor of such a matrilineal joint family in an age when it exists side by side with computers. Not even in the memory of the characters in the film, given their age and the allowance for fiction, for that matter. Still, what renders the question of probability or the lack of it out of season is a qualitative meaninglessness that is the logic of the pastiche. Within this discursive incongruity the symbols of the bygone glory of Madampally Meda as the signifiers of tradition and the computer that is brought in as the signifier of modernity are both knowingly clichés. The authority of these clichés is derived from the narrative conventions that are established as routine procedure by the industry and its syndicate professionalism. The authority that cajoles the spectator who *knows* what to expect and who *expects* what is known. Or, to take another example. The personality structure of the character of Ganga, in as much as the film takes recourse to psychology in whatever half-baked a manner, is central to the narrative of the film. That Nagavally is a foil to Ganga or is her contrary aspect, is in fact presupposed in the denotative function of such a convention institutionalized by the south Indian film industry in the form of the so-called ‘double role’. It is the discursive validation of this convention within the given context of the filmic narrative that makes possible the supposedly ‘split personality’ of Ganga’s character. Though the character of Nagavally is not personalized through another cast, what mediates the contrary aspects between the characters of Nagavally and Ganga is the common factor of the star-status of the actress, Shobhana. Thus,

that Nagavally who is the counter aspect of Ganga is at the same time her complementary aspect is suggested through the intersexuality of this convention and through the star-status which is its means, as much as through the simple minded psychological jargon that is pressed into service. What is to be noted is that here also there is a re-presentation of the theme of resolution and that it is exclusively within the discursive field of the popular cinema through its own means.

Seen in this way, the clichés of the simple binary of tradition/modernity are easy to recognize. Madampally Meda with its family rank and honour, ruled over by its overlords, the *karanavans*/the children of Saradamma who come there from Calcutta; Sreedevi of the Madampally Meda who is modest and not outgoing/Ganga who is married into the family and who lives in alien land; the defiance of the modern-minded Ganga (in the words of the *karanavan*)/the demurely grace of the home-bound Sreedevi estranged from husband because of an astrological setback; Sunny who took his doctorate in advanced psychoanalysis from America, Brahmadathan Namboodiripad, the great *vedic* scholar and high priest, who went to America to present a paper on parapsychology; the initial saffron costume of Dr. Sunny and his religious devotion to a Hindu god, together with his antics and acting-dumb that make a mockery of the former/his image of a modern, advanced psychoanalyst as he later reveals himself; the traditional image of Brahmadathan Namboodiripad with his priestly rituals of conjuring and exorcism, later how he finds himself perfectly at home with Dr. Sunny’s modern theories of psychoanalysis; the modern Christian youth, Dr. Sunny’s abiding by custom even as he proposes to Sreedevi in a ‘secular’ manner/the silent approval of the modest and tradition-bound Hindu girl, Sreedevi—and so on.

In this scheme of things the identity of Nagavally becomes of little consequence. Instead, what becomes relevant is the personality of Ganga who gets possessed by Nagavally. In fact, Ganga/Nagavally are not so much opposites as complementary counterparts, the more so as the character who serves as a foil to Ganga is apparently Sreedevi. That Nagavally is not personalized



as a character is itself related to the narrative function, that requires to keep her on the level of fable and oil portrait. Through all its overstated and concocted psychological theorizing the film makes the understatement that Nagavally who is a counter aspect of Ganga is at the same time an aberration in her personality. But the devious and oblique way in which the film makes the point that she is the manifest representative of 'defiance and modernity' (in the words of the *karanavan*) that she has acquired from her life in an alien far-off city, escapes our notice. It may be remembered that Sreedevi is never haunted by the ghost of Nagavally though she believes in all the spooky stories about the ghost and has a bend of mind vulnerable enough to be possessed by it. Conversely, it is the modern-minded, non-believing and city-bred Ganga who is haunted by the ghost of Nagavally. Representing the negative dominance of the overlord of the family, Nagavally is at once the forbidding nemesis and the benign guardian spirit within the narratives of family well-being. By daring to defy the forbidding, Ganga takes on what in the symbolic field is the negative power of the family honour—that is, tradition—by bringing to bear upon it the mundane rationality and thereby setting the negativity straight—that is, by inverting tradition which is what modernity is all about. This violation is done by a girl used to the modern ways of urban life in alien land.

When, on the narrative plane, the film apparently arrives at the wishful resolution of the tradition/modernity contradiction, related to the same concerns as defined within its own problematique is an attitude to womanhood that the film removes away from that plane. The unconscious motivations of this attitude are the moral fears and anxieties prompted by the changing inter-relationship of the concepts of womanhood, home and the outside world and their social dimension. These concerns that are seen from time to time in the Kerala social psyche seek their representation through newer social narratives.

The ideal that envisions woman as the symbol of tradition has its roots in the context of the tradition/modernity conflict in the colonial period. The woman

represents home and virtue. If it is she who is instrumental in keeping that threatened space together, in a sense she is also the reason for eroding it. That is how the woman who exists in the narratives of family well being as the forbiddingly repressive and the benignly protective force, becomes at the same time the symbolic negative power of patriarchy. It is not without reason that a society like that of Kerala embraces such an attitude more and more closely in the present times. The womanhood that is defined within the institutions of family, marriage and motherhood is the symbol of feminine ideal that is to be protected and sanctimoniously preserved. The responses to the social dimensions of the self-image of woman who is drifting away from the protected ideal of institutionalized womanhood, leads to complex mediations and inflections in the symbolic field. As she enters the public sphere and joins the outer ranks, it is the space she thereby leaves behind—the space of home and virtue that she represented—that comes under threat. As the earnings and income of a career woman is a vital source for the urban nuclear family, so is it important for the market from the point of consumerism. When the popular cinema gives expression to the ambivalence and moral fears of having to come to terms with the changing identity and self-image of the woman, subject to complex mediations and inflections, the other powerful mass media of the advertisement goes to reinforce the image of the efficient and outgoing career woman more and more, laying great store by her economic power to buy. The contradiction that is revealed in the moral ambivalence and equivocation in all such responses is what informs the range of representations of womanhood in the media, generally. What is of interest is to note that, ironically perhaps, the tone of self-righteous moralism that is characteristic of the media commentary about popular cinema is itself expressive of the defence against the same moral fears and anxiety in response to the changing self-image of woman—only that it attacks the popular cinema for expressing what it is always afraid of about itself.

It can be seen, nevertheless, that this response to the womanhood that has moved from the home out into



the public sphere is formed in terms of the inter-relation between woman and the home as defined within the colonial problematique. Partha Chatterjee notes that by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual—anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty.

The material is the domain of the 'outside', of the economy and of statehood, of science and technology, a domain where the West has proved its superiority and the East has succumbed. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an 'inner' domain, bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity.<sup>8</sup>

As Chatterjee further notes, the apparently 'material' and 'spiritual' domains got themselves demarcated as 'public' and 'private' in popular assumptions, which was presupposed in the 'world'/'home' divide. This was a new patriarchy in which the home as the site of the private that is not defiled by the compulsions of contact with the colonial power and by the profane activities of the material world, had its representation in woman<sup>9</sup>. The importance of the demarcation between home and the world in this scheme of things is what Madampally Meda as a signifier is all about. It is within the discursive interface between the punishing patriarchal authority and the punished womanhood that Nagavally who is ritually confined in the room forbidden from opening, becomes at once the prohibitory force and the guardian spirit. When everybody is awe-struck about the profanity of the ritual violation of having opened the room, no one seems to believe in the stories about Nagavally beyond a point. On the contrary, one of the elderly aunts asks quite casually in the film: "Why should we be so adamant towards the dead souls?"

The offence that Nagavally committed was to lend a personal measure to the private realm of the family. Because, to say after an observation of Madhava Prasad, in the old family, which is at once a family and an authoritarian regime, the private does not exist; the private is only invented in and through the relationship of the family to the state—the contract that ushers in the new patriarchy<sup>10</sup>. That is why, as Prasad goes on to argue, the unspoken alliance between the state (which

is only formally in place) and the numerous premodern points of power and authority prohibits the invention of the private as the zone of intimate exchange and union. Thus, the offence that Nagavally committed in the past—of having tried to convert the 'inner' and 'spiritual' realm of the family into the private as a personalized zone of intimate exchange and union—is repeated in the present by Ganga. Here, it is the woman as the symbol of tradition, who threatens the very space that she represents of home and virtue and that is held together by her. This woman who defiles the 'inner' and 'spiritual' private space of the family by personalizing it is the one who has ventured irrevocably out into the 'external' and the 'material' ranks of the public sphere. We see that it is not fortuitous that Ganga comes to Madampally Meda from the far-off alien land of Calcutta.

The society finds itself gradually coming to terms, however reluctantly, with the inevitability of woman's entry ultimately into the public sphere<sup>11</sup>. When faced with such a situation of structural changes and cultural shocks, the society reconciles with the moral fears and anxieties that it raises through a kind of inward defence in the form of inhibitions and denouncements. To redeem her from the sin of having come into contact with the outside world and the profane symbols of modernity and as an expiation for it, it does her well to accept a socially recognized code of conduct by admitting that she is still bound by the traditional concept of woman and that her identity is subject to its norms. Thus, as Chatterjee notes, within the culturally determinate domain set up by the *differences* between socially approved male and female conduct, "[once] the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programmes, and in time even take up employment outside the home"<sup>12</sup>. In other words, they can go as far as the frontiers of the private appropriated by the state.

That is how, absolved of the profanity of modernity and chastened through the processes performed by the implicit alliance between the state and the numerous



premodern points of power, Ganga is now eligible to join her husband and get back to Calcutta in her renewed self of essential femininity. She wakes up from the hypnotic spell to this new realization of her essential self and identity; when asked by the psychoanalyst who she is, she answers 'Ganga', and adds further 'Ganga Nakulan'<sup>13</sup>—an assertion that her identity is only secondary to that of the man through an acceptance of her institutionalized role as wife. The silent approval for Sunny, the 'modern' Christian youth, to seek alliance from Madampally Meda in line with the customs of tradition, is in fact complementary to this. That is another resolution, as well.

Films, like *Manichitrathazhu*, which used to be advertised recommending it particularly for family viewers, are the ideal films in common perceptions as they are perfectly in tune with the norms of our received cultural baggage. Such films in fact, by the manner in which they address the value sphere of the patricentric institution of the family, go to condition a particular kind of spectatorhood. A spectatorhood that affirms the subjectivity defined within the institutionalized relationships and roles as envisaged by the family. What is to be noted is how the motif of resolution on the apparent story level dissimulates the subtext produced by the media-specific discursiveness of its given narrative strategies and conventions. Those who argue about the casting or the acting skill of one artist or the other or about its theme, trying to make a case for its artistic merit, see the film only in and as the story; they do not see the mediations and manipulations that the media-specific discursiveness engages in on the secure apparent level of its theme which is a cumulative prefabrication of all the above aspects.

(An earlier version of this paper was presented in the Workshop on Film and Politics, in the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Madras, in March 2001).

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4. Madan Gopal Singh, 'Technique as Ideology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no.1 (October-December 1982), p.64
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11. It is interesting to note that whenever a similar situation occurred in other cultures as well, the responses were fraught with a kind of collective defensiveness. Discussing some of the post-War films, Ann Kaplan notes that they mark "the first impact of women's move into the work force during the war. The increased level of women's threat to returning veterans began to stimulate a deeper kind of reaction for which Freud's theories became a convenient conduit." Her observations on the pop-Freudian character type of the mother in the film *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942) is closer to our consideration: "Mrs. Vale's possessive, controlling behaviour serves as a displacement for social anxiety at the very moment (1942) when America's entry into the war entailed women's entry into the work force in large numbers. The fear of the mother that such a social situation re-evokes (i.e. the mother's power spilling out into the public sphere, not safely confined within the home) on the unconscious level feeds into the production of the hated, controlling figure."
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13. I owe this observation to S. Sanjeev who rightly draws attention to this aspect: S. Sanjeev, *Manichitrathazhu*, (Malayalam), *Kerala Padhanangal*, no.5 (October 1995), p. 69

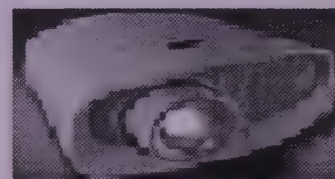




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# The weak may also win

Gonul Donmez-Colin talks to Takaaki Watanabe on his film *Maiden of the Spring*

**T**akaaki Watanabe who is from Gifu Prefecture in western Japan started working in the field of film in 1971, when he met Shinsuke Ogawa, a well known documentary filmmaker also from Gifu. He worked as assistant director and editor to Ogawa in films such as *A Song of the Bottom* (1975) which received the FIPRESCI award in Nyon, Switzerland. In the eighties, he moved to Kotobukicho in Yokohama, a place that is inhabited by people who live at the bottom of Japanese society. He made his debut as a director in 1981 with *The Slum Kotobuki, Live* which depicted the lives of those people. The work was noted for the pursuit of one's existence in a metaphysical way. He kept his point of view in *The Slum Kotobuki, Live II* (1984) and *Kawasaki, Burning Town* (1985) consistently stripping the outer layers off the society and uncovering the existence of the people that live at the bottom. This was followed by *Ikiru*. After a career as a TV and documentary filmmaker, which took him all around the world, he

began to teach at Japan Academy of Visual Arts and wrote the script of his first feature, *Alice's Sanctuary* (1995). A very stylized film about love that maintains itself as sacredly unconditional despite its unreasonable demands, *Alice's Sanctuary* received the FIPRESCI award at the International Mannheim Film Festival in 1995. *Mizu no Onna* (*Maiden of the Spring*, 2000), which garnered him the Best Director award at the 6th International Film Festival of Kerala 2001, is a mythological tale of life and love. An unusual marriage of epic and silent film, with stylized natural shots of the winter mountain landscape about to embrace spring and a samurai fairy tale involving breathtakingly choreographed swordplay, the film celebrates women as the source of all life. The following interview took place during the International Mannheim Film Festival 2000.

**Gonul Donmez - Colin: *Maiden of the Spring* has such a timeless quality. Is it based on a well-known Japanese myth?**

It is my original story and not based on a myth. However, there is a painting which depicts a similar woman and in Japan, traditionally women play the role of distributing water for the rice fields and therefore are connected with the water. For one thousand years when women were distributing the water, there was no problem. When men began distributing the same, problems started. Water is the source of life and I try to explain that we have problems since men are distributing water.

**Are you trying to make a statement when comparing the city and the country? 'The more brutal is the fellow from the city'.**

The head of the woman also comes from the city. The soldier from the city cuts it and throws it into the





water and the new woman comes out. The three barbarians from the mountain (representing three different age groups—youth, middle age and old age) are gentler. Through symbols, I am trying to say that the city and the country need each other, but they have to fight for power.

The soldier is not really a bad guy; he is simply following the orders of the Emperor. In the course of his mission, he changes from being a city person to a country person. Falling in love with a woman, he decides to stay there with her. He becomes honest to himself through the process. If human beings are subjected to nature, they can become honest to themselves.

I fuse the images of the landscape and the water with the image of the woman who emulates the beauty of the landscape. Nature is life and our environment. The woman says to the soldier, “do not take away the environment”. He can never destroy the beauty of it. The beauty of the river will be there despite high technology. Nagala River, which you see in the film, goes through the countryside to the city and you can actually drink from it. That is the miracle of it.



The film is about the Japanese heart, something deep inside.

**What do you mean by that?**

It is not about thinking or about relationship, but feeling and living inside the beauty. In the film, I tried to illustrate a message that cannot be captured in words—a message that needs to be transmitted through images. That is the traditional Japanese way of thinking. It is with feelings. If we want to say something about the quality of life, we can't say it with words.

**The colour of red dominates your film. The images of red—the blood, the carpet—are very strong especially when juxtaposed with the whiteness of snow. I find the scenes with blood too brutal, whereas the scenes on the red carpet are imbued in erotic sensuality.**

Life has combination of all sorts of energies that red symbolizes. I wanted to express the contrast. Red burning carpet. She is cold. Not human, but hot also. That is why she is sitting on a carpet. What all women have in the world!

**You return to the present time at the end. Yogi and the girl meet on a concrete bridge. They are wearing modern clothes. They look at each other. There is a flashback to the scene in the mountain, golden waters shimmering in the sun and back to the bridge again.**

The cycle of life is a continuous process of being reborn again and again. The man and the woman meet on the concrete bridge in contemporary Japan and they are still looking for each other. The bridge is on the same river at a different time. The concrete is part of the environment too and not a cold object.

**You are a completely independent filmmaker who makes low budget films. Is it true that you did not pay your actors? How did you convince such a beautiful young girl to sit on ice without even paying her?**

She liked the script! We gave the contents to the actors and we chose the ones who would play for free.

**It must have been difficult to work in sub-zero temperatures.**

We had many problems because of the snow. Many



images I could not use in the film. It was difficult to move around generators. Perhaps it would be different if we had more money. My previous film, "*Alice's Sanctuary*" was also made with a very little budget—mostly funds from non-commercial investors. This one is sponsored by Kodak.

**Alice's Sanctuary was a difficult film. I must admit I had trouble sitting through it.**

People felt sick in the movie! The script is based on an incident that took place in suburban Tokyo around 1989 when four juveniles confined and assaulted a seventeen-year-old girl for 40 days and eventually killed her. The girl's abandoned body was found cemented in a gasoline can. The incident was reported as a social problem among the juveniles calling them dropouts with hurt feelings. People wondered why the girl did not try to escape. The truth was sealed in the cement. I did not intend to trace the actual event, but rather tried to portray the feeling kept within the young girl's heart that could be found within all of us, sealed deep within ourselves. I pose two questions in the film: Is it possible to produce a film depending simply on one's strong feelings? And can the film depict one's life depending totally on

emotions? People live through their lives, keeping themselves in different costumes. The more they put on, things seem more decorative, but at the same time, people find themselves tied up. They learn to speak, binding themselves in words. They learn to live in relationships, finding themselves tangled. Though people are free in their emotions, emotions stand as the proof of one's living. Made of concentrated emotions, love, even when it is turned down, never vanishes. The feeling comes back over and over making one's heart ache. The film portrays the world of juvenile boys living in their ambiguity and of a girl living freely with herself depending totally on her emotions. Each frame reflects the strong feelings of the team to create a world depending totally on emotions and their desire to see

such a world themselves.

**What is the reaction of the Japanese audience to *Maiden of the Spring*?**

Young females say: "You have a heart". People care. We showed the film in Tokyo and also at the place where it was shot, around the rivers. Cinemas are in big cities. We are promoting cinema in the countryside because they also like movies in the countryside. I have rented a beautiful place in the mountains, in an area where the rich live and made a small theatre inside where we show Japanese films, 35mm, 16mm.

**What can you tell me about the Japanese film industry?**

I am with the film industry. I do what I please. The technique is always there but with "*Maiden of the Spring*," I wanted to add something: Love and the relation between nature and human beings. The story is simple. You can describe it in one word. We have to care about the ecological aspect of the world we live in. Perfect ecology is when people love each other. If you are not patient about what you want, you lose it. Winning is a matter of faith, not strength. The weak may win if they have faith.



# International Film Festival of Kerala

March 30 – April 6th 2001

## an Overview

Vasanti Sankaranarayanan

**I**nternational Film Festivals have become a part and parcel of the annual itinerary of Indian film lovers, film critics and organisers. The calendar would be somewhat like this: April, International Film Festival of Kerala, October : International Film Festival of India, November International Film Festival of Calcutta & International Film Festival of Bombay. Besides this there are Children's Film Festival which is held annually at Hyderabad and the Biannual Documentary Film Festival held at Bombay. There was a time ten years ago when there was only one annual international film festival held in India, the one organised by the Directorate of Film Festivals of India (DFFI) at New Delhi, the capital of India. As a token recognition of the need to decentralise film festivals, DFFI holds these international festivals at alternate centres such as Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Trivandrum, every alternate year. Whenever the festival was held at these alternate centres, the organisers used to complain that it was difficult to shift the venue and manage the administrative aspects of holding such a festival. At one time there was even a proposal to fix the venue permanently at New Delhi, but, the proposal got short shifted on account of a public outcry.

Meanwhile, there was another development which changed the position and significance of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) considerably. Regional centres such as Calcutta, Kerala and Bombay decided to hold international film festivals annually with state and private funding. Initially everyone felt that

these regional festivals will not be able to hold a candle to the festival held under the auspicious of the Information Ministry of the Central Government. But the successive festivals held at Kerala and Calcutta proved that these festivals could be as good or even better than the IFFI. The organisation was much better; there was less of bureaucracy and red tape; the film packages were varied and interesting. The quality of publications such as the daily bulletin, the festival book and other small books on film were better. More people from the regions were able to see good international films and have discussions with the directors and organisers resulting in a better film awareness in those regions.

Kerala Film Festival has a special place even among the regional festivals for the kind of enthusiasm shown

*The girl in the Sneakers*



by film viewers. In no other region have I seen ordinary people thronging the theatres during the festivals with such discrimination and dedication. Most of them know which film to see and which to reject. They observe absolute silence during the screenings. Hardly do they walk out before the film is over. After the film is over, one can overhear intelligent remarks on the thematic and technical aspects of the film. These viewers are not novices to international films. Film societies such as Chalachitra and Surya at Trivandrum and others in small towns and villages bring foreign film packages and have regular film shows and discussions, thus stoking the fires of film awareness. With the establishment of Chalachitra Academy which has taken over conducting of these annual film festivals, there has been an added interest in film by the government authorities. There is another quasi-government organisation, Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) which has been ably handling the many aspects of the function of film development. Altogether, Kerala has geared itself to holding international film festivals for the last six years. The fact that there is a competitive section in this festival, giving importance to films from the developing countries has added to the lustre of Kerala

*Close to the Border*



Film Festival; the hospitality to foreign and Indian delegates has been very good. So, over the years, Kerala festival became an event to look forward to by viewers, critics and delegates.

With such a background and history, viewers go to Kerala Film Festival with expectations. But, the 6th International Film Festival did not rise up to those expectations. In fact, one had the feeling of "*Puthiriyil Kallu Katichu*" as the Malayalee would put it, meaning, had the experience of biting of a stone with the first mouthful of rice. The Media Centre was situated at Kanakakunnu Palace, on top of a small hill which made commuting to the place difficult. The delegate passes on approved applications were not issued even three days after the festival began. I got my pass on time and without much effort; but newspaper reports reveal that this was an exception and not the rule. The film schedules came late and the supply fell very short of the demand. The daily bulletin also arrived late; the bulletin was, to say the least, shoddy in appearance and skimpy in contents. The Festival book was not available even for media persons; I had to go thrice to the Media centre; even then I didn't get it. Finally, it was my friend Mr. P. Ramesan who gave me a copy. At least, he knew that I was not

asking for it out of possessive instincts, but the need to use it as a reference book when I wrote on the festival. The feeling I had was, how a privilege can be reduced to a gesture of friendship or concession. Whenever anyone complained about these shortcomings, the standard answer from the organisers was, "There is a fund crunch this year". But, that didn't seem to affect the lunch and dinner parties hosted by the organisers to the special delegates. One has to question the priorities of the organisers. Was it more important for them to please the foreign delegates and be the good boys in their eyes than to offer the minimum and expected comforts and privileges to ordinary film viewers?

The saga of inefficiencies continued. The films did not start on time and this





*Maral*

was a first for the Kerala Film Festival. I remember, fondly of the year when Bina Paul was the director of the festival. The films started on time, the projection was good because Bina made it a point to supervise personally each and every show arranged for the delegates. This year, at one of the video film screenings the video equipment turned up half an hour later than the scheduled screening time. Most of the viewers got impatient and walked out. At another screening, "*The Journey through Body*", the director, Jorge Palaco was made to wait outside the gates of New Theater where his film was scheduled to be screened. Everywhere, one felt the absence of the festival representatives, who are supposed to take care of these organisational matters. They were not able to control the crowds at some of the screenings, especially the retrospective of Thomas Alea, held at Sree theatre, with limited seats. Couldn't the organisers have guessed that Thomas Alea would be a hot favourite in a place like Kerala and organised the screenings at a bigger theatre. The feeling of indifference to details persisted throughout the festival. I say this with a sense of shame, as I am a Keralite who used to feel proud that this festival was one of the best in India. Again, I say it with a feeling of frustration that a festival which maintained such

high standard in operations can go down in one year thanks to the mismanagement of a few people.

All this would have been forgotten if the film packages shown were extraordinary. One does not expect more than ten really good films in the world cinema section of an international film festival. But, even that was absent in this festival. '*Winters Sleepers*' by Tom Tyker was an exceptional film. It is a haunting film about passions, emotions, love and death. Set against a wintry landscape it deals with the bizarre events set in motion by a mysterious car accident. A terrible sense of foreboding envelops the stillness of the landscape. Like in his other film "Run, Lola Run" Tyker stresses on the effect of chance on peoples' lives. Another remarkable film was "*The Girl in the Sneakers*" directed by Iranian film maker, Rassul Sadr Ameli. The protagonist is a young girl who runs away in protest against the oppressive living conditions of her home. She begins a journey in Teheran to explore the world around her. She sees the beautiful scenery along the lush orchards in the town; she also comes face to face with the seamier aspects of the town. Her miraculous escapes from the encounters in the seamier world builds the suspense in the film. Throughout the film one is impressed with the curiosity and spontainity of the girl whose lack of artifice appeals to anyone who meets her. *The Highway Crossing* by the Estonian director Arko Okk, has a story with witty

*The Sea that Thinks*



dialogue and an unpredictable course of events? The film is based on a play inspired by Alexander Pushkin's fairy tale called *A Tale of a Fisherman and a Fish*. It is a parable of how money influences our thinking, feelings and goals. Money corrupts and destroys even strong friendships. *Close to the Border* an Argentinian film by Rodolfo Duran, was interesting though one could not follow it fully as there were no subtitles. The protagonist is a journalist who was compromised and had to flee. He meets with an unconventional priest and two women who change his life. *The Sea that thinks* by Gert de Grooff is a film about filmmaking itself. It focuses on Bart, a scriptwriter who is writing the script for this film. He types what he does and does what he types. The reality and illusion merge with each other and the viewers finally realise that through a game filled with optical illusions and continually changing points they are looking at themselves and not the scriptwriter. *The runner* an Iranian film by Amir Naderi, depicts the life of an orphan boy, who lives in an abandoned ship earning a living through casual jobs such as shoeshining. But, he is always in a hurry, he runs, he races. He tries

*Ali Zaoua*

to outdistance his illiteracy by ceaselessly learning all kinds of things, like where the ships and planes are heading. He is a good example of a person who is struggling to find an identity in adverse circumstances, succeeding to some extent through his sheer individuality and self will. *Oriundi*, the inaugural film is by Brazilian director Ricardo Barvo, starring Antony Quinn as the protagonist Guiseppe. He witnesses the crumbling of the family business he built up in the hands of his descendants. The appearance of Sophia, a young woman who resembles Guiseppe's dead wife, changes the scenario for Guiseppe. Set in the town of Curitiba, south of Brazil, it is a strange and mysterious love story which ends on a hopeful note. There must have been one or two more good films that I missed. But, on the whole, the world cinema section was disappointing.

The retrospectives this year, consisted of eight films of well known Iranian film maker, Mohsen Makmalbaf and four films of Cuban film maker, Thomas Alea. Most of the Makmalbaf films have already been shown in the previous international film festivals recently. So, they did not hold a great deal of excitement to a







*Journey through the Body*

discerning viewer. The exceptions were "*The Actor*" and "*Once Upon a Time Cinema*" which were unusual in their content and technique. In any case, Makmalbaf's films are not comparable to the grandeur of the previous retrospectives such as Kislavsky or Pasolini or Eisenstein. Viewing of Thomas Alea's films became a discomfort because of the crowds and lack of seating space; one could not appreciate the full significance of those films. There were four homages to past film personalities—Bahadur, Karamana Janardhanan Nair, and Balan K Nair from Kerala and Ritwik Ghatak of Bengal. As gestures of honouring the dead, they were befitting.

The saving grace for this festival came from two directions—the French film package of women's films and the German film package entitled "A decade of German Cinema" which was in India in connection with the recently concluded German Festival in India. Both were representative of the modern trends in film making in France and Germany. The films had to be looked at individually as they do not belong to any specific genre. They truly display the post-modernist traits of individual styles and themes. However, I

noticed some common trends. The over-emphasis on technique was conspicuously absent. Technique became complementary to theme. The themes were not unduly abstract. Narrative has not been shunned. But, above all, there is a noticeable emphasis on human relationships and the emotions ensuing from them. "Love", the forgotten and banished emotion from European films and the shunning of love as an expression of sentimentalism or melodrama has been given up. "Love" is the prominent theme in all the films and the film makers seem to be saying through these films—enough of acrobatics with technique; enough of mystification through abstraction; enough of shunning of love and other such emotions. Hurrah! to these new trends in European film making.

Another saving grace was the competition films. During the last two years, after the competition section has been introduced in Kerala Film Festival, one did not see too many quality films. That was understandable as the organisers were paying more attention to films from the developing countries and the experimental films of young film makers. But, this year, there were at least four or five films from countries such as Japan,



Argentina, Chile, Iran and Morocco which were exceptional in their film technique and in their themes. This is a remarkable achievement for the Kerala Film Festival. Attracting such films for the competitive section from the international arena, Kerala Film Festival can be said to have "arrived". *Maiden of the Spring* by the Japanese director Takaaki Watanabe is set 1000 years ago in a fantasy land. It is about the love of a mountain man, Yogi for a beheaded princess, who is brought back to life by the spirit of nature. A Samurai is dispatched from the city to retrieve the head, which was stolen by the Yogi and his two friends. The movie ends tragically when the Samurai kills Yogi. The princess, who is the *Maiden of the Spring* transforms herself into a drop of water and flows away. The ability of the director to link the past with the present, marrying myth and traditional customs in a storytelling mode against the scenario of the snow covered mountain areas in Japan is remarkable. But, it is the lyrical quality of the flow of the shots making it into a ballad or an old poem which appeals. The connection of woman to nature, especially the life-giving water, is

*Winters Sleepers*

brought out visually without any overt statements. It may be mentioned that Watanabe won the award for the best director. The next film which appealed to me is *Maral* by Iranian film maker Mehdi Sabeghzadeh. Here, the theme is not very novel. Rezvan, a Moslem woman, who is a true representative of Islamic fundamental beliefs, forces her husband Hadji to agree to marry one of the shelterless women who escaped from the disaster of a recent earthquake. But Rezvan was not prepared for Hadji falling in love with the beautiful Maral. At this point jealousy takes over Rezvan. Finally, it is the honesty of Maral, the young girl and the equanimity of Hadji which saves them all from impending tragedy and brings happiness. Here, the older woman's exaggerated religiosity, pitted against the vulnerability of a man approaching his middle age has been subtly dealt with. *Ali Zaoua*, the Moroccan film directed by Nobil Auouch which won the prize for the best film was good. Yet, in my opinion, it was not as good a film as the Argentinian and Chilean films. Ali, and his three friends are street kids in Casablanca. The streets are their home and the people who live





there are their family. With nowhere to go, or hide, survival is an everyday problem and friendship is their irreplaceable bond. Ali is killed one day in a meaningless act of revenge; his friends decide to give him a burial befitting his status as their leader and they succeed. It is a film about quests, transgression, death and accomplishment. The Chilean film *Somewhere in the Night* is the tale of two brothers lost to each other through the inevitability of life. Their father's death in an accident and the ensuing car journey to reach the spot of the accident, puts them in proximity with each other. Their disagreements and grievances against each other are brought out into the open and finally they realise that their love for each other was far greater than all these. It has the quality of a dream and journeying into the interior landscape. The last but not the least is the Argentinian film directed by Jorge Polaco, *Journey through the Body*. This is an unusual love story between a photographer and a blind woman. Both are seekers of love in different ways. The painter, oppressed by his mother and her grandiloquent ambitions for her son, moves away; as a photographer he is a voyeur. He meets the blind woman by accident. They reach out to each other, but are never able to gain fulfilment. Finally at the moment when they break all the bonds and achieve fulfilment, the woman dies. The man continues photographing, but with blindfolded eyes. Every aspect in this film has elements of fantasy and symbolism—the houses of the mother and the blind woman, the appearance of the fortune teller, an old woman in a toy train in a park. The viewer can take it all at face value or search for inner meanings and truths. The director gives us a free hand. No wonder some of the viewers could not rise above the view that this was a pornographic film. Anything to do with “body” is thus automatically reduced to pornography.

Another novel feature of this festival is that it devoted many screenings to short films and films by students. As a gesture of encouragement to young filmmakers this has to be appreciated. But, as a viewer, I preferred the long feature films from different parts of the world. Maybe, I am of a viewer than a teacher or an educationist, when I go for a film festival.

This article would be incomplete without a mention of the Open Forum organised year after year by the Federation of film Societies and is always a focal point for discussions, debate and public airing of opinions on the films shown in the festival. Unfortunately this year, the Open Forum was very disappointing in quality and content. The fact that most of the discussions were in Malayalam, the local language acted as a deterrent to the guests from other states and countries to wholly participate in the discussions. Most of the discussions were on the do's and don'ts of the state awards or the working of the KSFD. There was hardly any discussion on the films shown or film-related topics. Often the discussions turned into wrangling matches. The discussion time was mostly taken up by the speakers on the platform, giving little chance to the viewers (participants) to air their opinions. The moderators were not allowed to function effectively. Altogether, the organisers as well as participants seemed to have forgotten the purpose and focus of Open Forums. At best, the statements made by speakers as well as participants can be deemed only self-propagatory.

If this overview seems overcritical, the only defense I would like to offer is this. As an admirer of The International Film Festival of Kerala, I found it hard to believe that the organisation could turn out to be so half-hearted and indifferent. The excuse that there was not enough funds does not satisfy. Cut the costs by all means, but not on the quality of films, the projection standards and simple things like the schedules, daily bulletin and the festival book. These should be the first priorities, not the number of films or the number of foreign guests. Again, the criticism that the Indian films, especially Kerala films do not get good exhibition opportunities also should be seriously viewed. The International Film Festival should not be reduced to a spectacle, and an opportunity for some people to get contacts to go to foreign countries or attend foreign film festivals. If it is to retain its democratic charter, the factors which will facilitate good viewing and good discussions of films should be given priority. Then, the rest will fall in place.



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